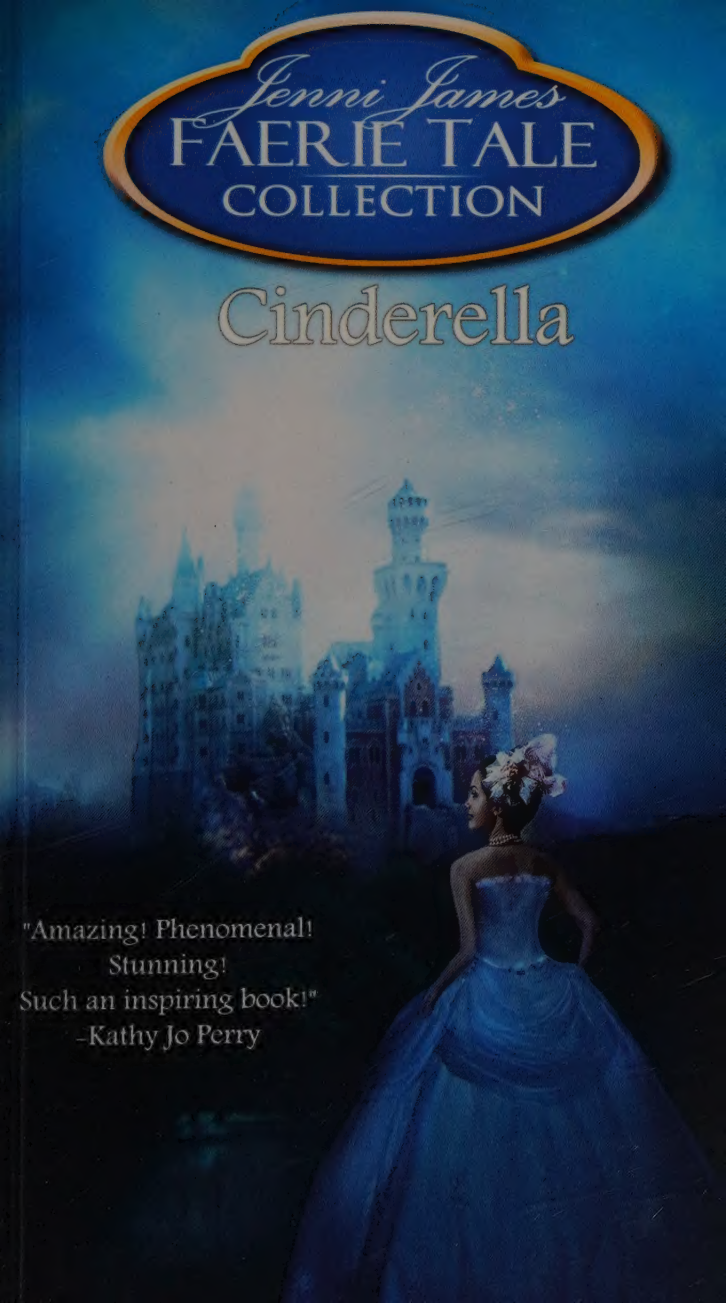
Jenni James

FAERIE TALE COLLECTION

Cinderella



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Cinderella

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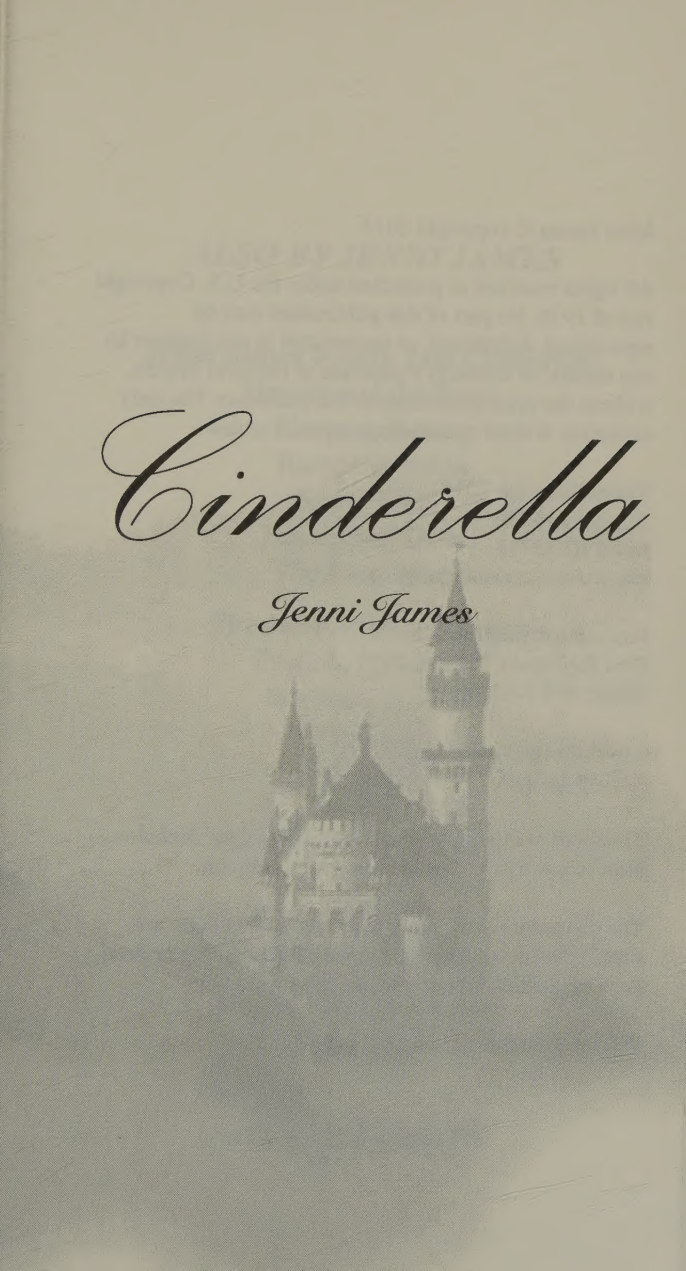

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This book is dedicated to M.M. Bennetts.
I love you!

Cinderella

Chapter One

ELLA PICKED UP THE last basket of clothing, her arms strained from attempting to carry the heavy, wet mass the twelve or so feet to the drying line. Thankfully, her stepmother had the gardener place the line closer to the house and in its shade, due to the sun fading her clothes, or Ella would have had to walk even farther from the washing room. Most fine houses used the drying lines inside, but Lady Dashlund preferred to have hers outside on warm days, so making the work twice as hard for Ella.

As Ella shook out the last of the petticoats, she overheard her stepsister Jillian shriek.

Oh, dear. She probably saw a mouse.

Ella sighed and quickly snapped the lacy fabric onto the line. Tossing in the remaining pins, she picked up the basket and ran toward the large manor home. No doubt they would all be in an uproar, and upset if they could not find her.

Another shriek rang out, loud and shrill, as Ella slipped off her outer shoes in the entrance near the servants' quarters and hung the wet apron to dry on one of the wooden pegs mounted upon the stone wall. She could clearly hear her stepmother shouting by the time she managed to wrap another clean apron around her waist and head up the servants' stairs.

Brushing and smoothing her dress with her hands as she went, Ella tried to remain calm. That summer, it had been especially difficult to keep the mice population down. The whole kingdom suffered from the vermin, and her stepmother and stepsisters seemed to take the sight of them the hardest. Ella was the only one of the four brave enough to try to catch them, and she had better do so quickly before her stepmother's temper got the best of

her family. That was all she needed—Lady Dashlund in a foul mood. Then the whole house would pay for several days.

As she rounded the corner into the large, immaculate corridor, her feet tread upon the fine, lush carpet her father had chosen. The sumptuous rugs from the Orient lavishly displayed throughout the rooms were one of the final improvements he had made to the house before he passed on a few years back. Her heart lurched. Oh, how she missed that man. How there were days when she truly needed him near her.

Ella approached the drawing room and attempted one last time to make herself presentable before she entered. She was rather surprised to hear joyous sounds coming from within. Taking a step into the room, she beheld Jillian and Lacey laughing quite loudly and dancing about together like small girls.

Finding her stepmother across the way near the rose-colored settee, she walked up and curtsied. "Is there anything I can do for you? I heard the shouting and came as quickly as possible."

Lady Dashlund shooed her with a wispy

white handkerchief, a rather large smile upon her face. "No, no. We are not in need of anything. We are all quite elated. You are welcome to continue with your chores—we will call you when we need you."

It was then that Ella noticed the small missive in her stepmother's hand. They must have had some good news. Curious, but not willing to risk Lady Dashlund's wrath, she simply said, "Yes, milady." Ella nodded, dipped into a short curtsy, and turned to go.

"No." Miss Lacey Dashlund halted in mid-twirl and put her foot down to catch her balance. "Ella cannot go just yet. We *do* need her, Mother. *Think*—the duke is coming here in only a few minutes. We need everything to look splendid! He is coming! He is coming! And this time—this time I shall finally secure him." Lacey squealed and shrieked loudly, and then picked up her sister's arm and began dancing about again.

"Girls, enough," scolded Lady Dashlund, though she was smiling. "It is time you freshen up and stop gallivanting around or you will be quite flushed when he comes."

Miss Dashlund twirled Jillian out in a final

spin and then giggled with her as they stopped their play. "Oh, is it not the most glorious day?" She smiled and waltzed her way to the settee, clasping her mother's hands within her own.

"Yes. It is." Lady Dashlund grinned at her daughter before turning toward Ella. "Will you please let Cook know to send up tea as soon as the duke arrives, and make sure she adds a little something special—something to make him stay this time."

"Yes."

"Oh, and when you are through, please sweep off the front step. We do not want him walking up to the house when it looks such a sight."

"Yes, milady." Ella curtsied again and rushed from the room. She would have to be quick to clean off the whole of the front steps before the duke arrived. Lord Gavenston rarely came late. In fact, more often than not, he was early.

She hoped for his sake and Lacey's that her stepsister would not blunder this meeting like she had previously. Ella winced. Lacey was always incredibly graceful—unless His

Grace was around. And then, quite simply, she became a bumbling buffoon and would somehow or another cause great catastrophes. Hopefully, this time all would be well. Ella crossed her fingers for luck just in case. After all, the sooner Miss Dashlund was gone from the house, the fewer chores Ella would have to do for her silly stepsister.

"OH, NO! YOU ARE not getting me to step foot into that house." His Royal Highness Prince Anthony chuckled as he drew in the reins on his beautiful horse, causing him to stop in his tracks about a half mile down the road that would eventually lead them to Lady Dashlund's rather exquisite manor. The manor, he could tolerate. It was the family that made him shudder.

"But you promised," Lord Gavenston replied, drawing in his rather fine black as well.

Anthony shook his head. "No, I did not. I promised to accompany you on some errands, Cousin. I did not promise to waltz myself into *that* home and be prodded and fawned over

like some ninny. Why, those girls could cool the east, lowering the temperature a whole two degrees with their eyelash fluttering alone." The prince ridiculously fluttered his own lashes. They were on the most glorious of roadways, with fine green hills and rows of delicious apple and sturdy oak trees, some of the greatest lanes in all the kingdom, and here he was—looking the fool instead of enjoying the marvelous countryside.

Zedekiah laughed. "You are quite awful, you know."

"I kno-ow!" he replied in a singsong voice, the type reserved for pantomimes.

"And you look like a nincompoop." Zedekiah clicked his tongue and tapped his mount to press onward. "I, for one, would not wish to be seen with you if you are to act this way."

"I cannot. I simply cannot do it," Anthony replied as he tapped his horse as well. "My mother would have my head if she knew I had even spoken to them, let alone stepped in their house—and you know it!"

"This is why I had to sneak you away, so you would accompany me." Zedekiah looked

over as Anthony came up. "The queen forces me to run these errands because she and Lady Dashlund were schoolgirls together. She does it to pay particular courtesy to her longtime friend. But she would rather be dead than seen conversing with the woman, which is why I, as the duke, must be her go-between. And honestly, I wish anything—anything—other than this task."

"I pity you, but I cannot risk it. They would devour me in a heartbeat."

"Come! You have not been here for ages—a good five years at least. They may have grown since then."

The prince crowed. "Yes, and this is why you need me to hold your hand. Because they are such proper ladies and behave so well! No, my mother has told me anecdotes about what the family has done to the royal castle alone. I have sheets and sheets written to me of nonsense this Miss Dashlund has done—do you have any idea how much it cost my mother to host them the last time they came? The number of shrubs she had to replace because of that girl's foolishness?"

"Which is why I need someone with me

now. I would rather come out of there in one piece!" Zedekiah begged. "Please?"

Anthony stared at him as their horses rounded the corner of the lane. The great house was about forty feet in front of them. He looked up and then reached over, his hand waving his cousin to a halt. "Who is that on the steps?" he asked quietly as both horses stopped.

"I do not know." Zedekiah peered at the girl Anthony indicated. "She looks like a maid of some sort. Why?"

"Because I could swear it is Ella."

Chapter Two

"ELLA?" ZEDEKIAH ASKED.

Anthony smiled. "Yes. Eleanoria Woodston, Lord Dashlund's daughter."

"Who? I only know of Miss Dashlund—Lacey, and Jillian, the younger one, his stepdaughters. There is a third?"

"No one has heard of her in years, and so everyone has forgotten she existed. But I have not. She was the only girl who could outride me during the summer festivals, do you remember? When we were about eleven or twelve or so, how she would boast about it and make everyone angry?"

"More likely just make you angry. We

were all laughing. But, yes, I do remember now. The only girl who could outstrip the prince in any event." He chuckled.

"Yes, but she did not know I was the prince then. Father would have whipped me good if he knew you and I were creeping out in the stable boys' clothing and dirt to be amongst them all."

Zedekiah laughed. "Risking our necks was not on our parents' agendas for the festivities."

"Precisely, which is why we had to slip out to have the fun. Who enjoyed being in a castle, looking down at the village below, when you could be down there experiencing it all?"

"Oh, how I miss those days!" Zedekiah twisted in his saddle. "Of course, now you have lost your adventurous streak, have you not? You will not even go into a house to say hello to your old friends."

"Hush. Listen to me." Anthony rode his horse a pace or two closer. "I do believe it is Ella, though why is Lord Dashlund's daughter dressed like a servant? And why has no one heard of her in ages? Something is not right here, and I want to get to the bottom of it."

He waited until Zedekiah approached. "I will have an adventure, just not the one you would choose. Do me a favor—do not announce to her who I am. And especially do not let the family know I am with you as well. Tell them you came with an outrider of some sort, if you must."

Zedekiah grinned. "As you wish. So, uh—what do we call you, then?"

"Do you not remember? I always went by my middle name among the villagers."

"Ah, yes! Jonathan. Good ol' John. My, er, outrider."

"Precisely."

Ella glanced up and saw the men approaching. Oh, dear, she was not even halfway through with the sweeping. Her stepmother would be livid. As quickly as possible, she swept what she could and left the white marbled steps, going around to the back of the house near where the duke was climbing off his saddle and handing the reins to the stable boy. The other man did so as well.

She ignored them both as she walked past the stables to the washing room and hung the

outdoors broom upon its peg in there. Her mind was too preoccupied with her chores to be overly concerned about any of the visitors who came to the home. Soon she would have to begin ironing the clothes that were on the line now, but her stepsisters' bedrooms would need to be attended first. Brushing her hands upon her apron, Ella walked out of the room and came flush up to the man who had just arrived with the duke.

"You startled me!" she gasped, her hand flying to her chest.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to." The man bowed and came back up, his dark brown eyes sparkling.

Those eyes looked vaguely familiar. She glanced over his sandy, darkish-blond hair, but there was no recognition. He was probably about her age, or just a year or two older.

"When I saw you, I had to come and say hello to my old opponent."

"Your old opponent?" She took a step back. "Do I know you?"

"Frankly, I am surprised you do not remember me. I would know you, Eleanoria

Woodston, anywhere. My biggest rival at every festival race when we were children." He grinned down at her, his gaze taking in her lively blue eyes and light brown hair. Even though she was dressed plainly, he could see she had become a very attractive woman.

She took a step back, her hand going wildly out to the white doorframe. A smile played upon her lips until she looked behind him and clamped her mouth shut. "I do not know who you mean. And I am sure we have never met before." She curtsied quickly and said, "Good day, sir," before brushing past him to speak to the old man who had come up behind him. "Hello, Hansen. Are you feeling well today?"

"Aye, Miss. Thank you. My rheumatism has not acted up at all this morning."

"That is good to hear. You make sure you use that oil at least twice a day. I would not want Lady Dashlund to find out. Please let me know if you need anything—come to me first." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Please?"

His craggy smile lit up his worn features. "Aye, Miss. Only a fool would go to your

step—uh—" he stopped mid-sentence, glancing straight at the visitor before finishing lamely, "—er, Lady Dashlund first."

Ella nodded, and Hansen smiled once more before departing. Then, instead of turning to speak to the stranger, she hurriedly made her way to the back of the house to go through the servants' entrance.

"Wait, Ella!" he called out.

She stopped and turned on her heel. "Shh! What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. A moment of your time, perhaps."

She placed a hand on her hip and looked over to the outbuildings. "I cannot right now. I am extremely busy."

He grinned. "Are you really turning me down?"

Ella looked at him incredulously. "Yes. I have a lot to do this morning and I do not have time to waste chatting with someone I do not remember."

"Well, then!" His grin grew. "Now I know what this feels like."

"What? People not having time for you?"

"Essentially, yes. And not wanting to

have anything to do with me, either." He took a step closer to her. "So much so, they lie about remembering me."

"I did not lie! I do not remember you."

"And yet another falsehood slips from your mouth." He stepped forward again. "What are you trying to hide from me?"

She sighed and folded her arms. "Why would I have anything hide?"

His gaze slowly made its way from her wispy hair, pulled back in a hurried bun, down the length of her servant's attire, all the way to her dirty shoes and then back up to her face again. He did not say a word.

Ella raised her chin higher. "Yes? Is there something you would like to know?"

One eyebrow rose as a challenge. "Ella Woodston, daughter of Lord Dashlund—one of the wealthiest merchants in the kingdom—why are you dressed as a servant? What has happened to you?"

She threw her hands in the air in an act of disgust and turned on her heel again, this time making her way past the house into the small orchard behind it. The pretty trees were in full blossom. "You are still the same nosy boy you

were back then—I am positive you have not changed a bit!"

"Ah-ha! So you do remember me! I knew you did!"

"Of course I remember you, *John*." She paused and picked a few pink flowers from one of the stems. "How could I forget the only boy who actually cried when I beat him at the races?"

Chapter Three

"CRIED? I DID NOT cry!" John sputtered.

Ella giggled and plucked at another branch, glad she could get under his skin. "What are you doing here with the duke, anyway?"

"I am his outrider."

It was her turn to take a good, long look at him—inspecting his fine clothes and expensive boots. "He dresses his outriders well—almost, I dare to say, better than himself." Her eyes met his.

John nodded. "We do use the same tailor. I am intended to be at court most of the time, so this is how I dress, yes."

"Hmm…"

"I *am* at court every day."

"I am sure you are. But it does not explain why I have never seen you *here* before."

"Oh, well, today he has express news from Her Royal Majesty, so I attended him. It is more official that way."

"Well, then, what news does your duke bring the ladies of the manor this morning?" she asked in a tone that implied she was not curious, even though she was more than a little bit interested.

He waved it aside. "Just an invitation to a ball the queen is hosting in a fortnight."

"A ball?" She thought of all the work she would have to do to get them ready and grimaced.

"You do not like balls?"

"No, I imagine they are horridly boring, actually."

He looked shocked, and then grinned. "But they say the prince is going to be there. Does that not entice you?"

"What?" She threw her head back and laughed. "The prince? Why?"

"I thought all lovely maidens wanted their chance at winning his heart."

She laughed harder. If John did not stop, she might expire right then and there.

"I am quite serious. What is so hilarious about this question?"

As if she would ever want to fall in love with a prince. After some time, Ella was able to catch her breath. But when she saw his countenance, she began laughing again. "Stop!" she gasped. "Do not look that way—it is too funny."

"Ha, ha. I am glad I can be of some amusement for you," he answered ruefully, glancing away from her.

After a few more moments she said, "I am sorry. No, really, I do apologize." She straightened up, but a grin still lingered upon her mouth. "I simply do not see the excitement over such a ridiculous man."

John's eyes grew wide. "Ridiculous man? You are calling m—er, Prince Anthony a ridiculous man? Do you even know him?"

"Know him? Why would I want to know him? He must be the silliest, most foppish man in all the kingdom."

"But why would you say such a thing? I truly thought all women loved him. He is said to be quite handsome, you know."

"And that would allure me how? Any man who spends more time looking in the mirror than he does actually living life is of no consequence to me. I would prefer any man to a spoiled, pampered prince."

"*Any* man?"

"Yes."

"Come to the ball with me."

"I beg your pardon?"

John looked more surprised than she did. "I am—uh, I am so sorry! I do not know where that came from. I—I—"

She grinned. "Are you attempting to retract the invitation now?"

He stepped back. "No!"

She took a step toward him. "I understand. First you invite me to guarantee I would become eager to attend, and then you hope to dash all my dreams to smithereens."

The look on his face was so horrified and confused she could not help herself—she had to laugh again.

When he realized she was jesting, he

asked, "Do you mock all the men who come to court you?"

"Are you courting me, then?"

"I, uh—" He was clearly out of his element.

She took another step closer to him, her hand reaching out to trail up his arm. "John, is there something you wish to convey to me?"

"Uh…"

"Something that expresses the true reason why you have followed me to this secluded copse?"

He swallowed and froze as she drew nearer, his hand going out to a trunk to steady himself.

Slowly, Ella stood on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, "It would not matter if you were the prince. I certainly would not go with you to the ball."

He caught her shoulders before she could pull away. "Why?"

Her eyes locked with his. "Because I do not like to dance."

"How do you feel about being courted?"

She blinked a few times and then answered, "Not very well. Not even if you

meant it." She took a deep breath. "Clearly you do not mean any such thing—you only wish to unsettle me. And I will not be unsettled."

"Ella, what happened?" he whispered.

They were still too close, but she did not dare move out of his arms. "What do you mean?"

"You used to be so fearless and unguarded. And now—now you are cautious and reduced to…" He pointedly looked down at her attire.

He knew she was a servant here. Her heart skipped a beat as she pulled out of his arms. "I like to help and I prefer not to soil my nice clothing."

He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand and nodded. "Very well. I see you are in good spirits, and so I will not tease you out of them again. Instead, let us talk about happier things. How are you? How is your family? Is your father well?"

She opened her mouth to speak and then looked away.

"I have done it again, have I not? I have said something that disconcerts you."

"No." She shook her head and attempted a smile. "No. You obviously have not heard the news." She tossed the blossoms to the ground and pasted a brave smile upon her face. "My father passed on a few years back. But his wife—my stepmother—Lady Dashlund and my stepsisters are all in good health. And you will most likely see them at the ball, for they will certainly attend such entertainments."

"Ahh…forgive me. I am sure my mother mentioned the news of his death, but I had not remembered. And that would explain why no one has seen you—and why you have not been presented at court."

"Yes, well, there was my mourning period, of course. And then—and then—I do not believe I ever fully came out of mourning. It is just not the same without him."

His eyes traced her features. What must it have been like to face such tragedy, for no one had loved his daughter more than Lord Dashlund his Ella. She must miss him terribly. Like Anthony would miss his father.

Determined to cheer her up and change

the subject, he asked, "Do you still ride your swift mare as fast as you once did?"

Her features clouded with pain. "No."

"No?" He was stunned. "What do you mean? Who rides her, then?"

"I do not know. I had to sell her shortly after the funeral."

John paused. "You had to sell the horse your father gave you? No one could beat you on that horse, not even me. You were made to ride her, and she is gone?"

"Yes. But I am well with it. I am sure it would have brought on too many memories of my father to ride her as I did."

"Or helped you heal from the pain of those memories more quickly."

She took in a shaky breath. "Yes, well—"

"Ella?"

"Yes?"

His eyes were so gentle. "I am sorry."

She brought her lips together. "'Tis nothing, really."

"No. It is something. It is something indeed to lose your father and your best friend

at the same time. And I am sorry."

Folding her arms, she looked down and blinked at a few wayward tears. How did he know? How did someone from so long ago truly remember her? But not only remember her—how did he know what no one else did? That she was suffering. That she *had* suffered. How did this man reach through her every barrier and shake her to her core? No one had been able to before. No one had ever cared. "Thank you," she replied quietly.

His boots came into view and then she felt his strong arms wrap all the way around her. Ella gave in for just a few moments and allowed her head to settle upon his chest. For just that little instant, she soaked in his calming heartbeat and allowed the world to drift by.

He rubbed his chin on top of her messy bun. "Ella Woodston, I know you do not like dancing, but will you go to the ball with me? We do not have to dance. We can sit quietly and watch others, or wander the gardens and talk—catch up and enjoy the moonlight. Will you, my old rival? Will you allow me to accompany you?"

"I have not been personally invited," she mumbled into his fine coat.

"I have just done so. Would you like your own invitation? Would it make it easier to accept your very own, instead of one addressed to the whole family? Would you feel obligated to come then? I could certainly arrange it."

She fiddled with the lapel of his jacket. "You must be very well acquainted with court to have that type of leverage over the royal family."

He chuckled softly, his chest rumbling and moving slightly as he did so. "You have no idea."

"Yes," she whispered, surprising herself.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I will come. Only if you promise I do not have to dance."

Chapter Four

ELLA WAS GOING TO be ill. Why in heaven's name did she agree to go to that ball? How would she get there? What in the world would she wear? And how would she convince her stepmother to allow her to go—assuming she was able to find her own way to the castle, as there was only room in the carriage for the three of them in their finery. It was a hopeless mess and the sort of stress she certainly did not need at this time. Already, the chore list had nearly doubled in their excitement to have everything just so.

"Ella!" Jillian shouted from down the corridor. "Ella! I have just found the perfect

lace for my gown. Come this instant and tell me what you think."

Ella sighed. *Honestly? She could not have me come to her later—it must be this second?* She dropped her dusting cloth, stood up from the baseboard she was cleaning in the hall, and made her way to Jillian's ornate room. Everything was done in a series of greens and golds with an elegant hand. The finest of fabrics and furniture gloriously bedecked the room that had cost her father a small fortune to create for his stepdaughter. When he remarried, he wanted the girls to feel at home, and so allowed them each to create their own lavish rooms in whatever style and color they preferred. As he reminded Ella, it would be the room where they spent the most time and must be as comfortable and perfect for them as possible so they could feel like they belonged.

He offered to redo Ella's room as well, but she refused to remove the decorations her mother had chosen. It had been done in soft blues and yellows just for her when she was a small girl, and Ella could not bear the thought of changing a thing. Some of the pictures

and paintings within that room were her most treasured possessions.

Though she was not allowed in it at all anymore, the room still remained the same. And on days when things were not too busy or had become too difficult to abide, Ella would slip into her old bedroom and stay in there, allowing it to wash away all the hurt and awfulness until she was calm again and could face her new life once more.

She passed the door that had once been hers and stepped into the bedroom next to it. "Yes, Jillian? Did you need me?"

Her stepsister spun around from her mother's old standing looking glass. She wore her finest gown. "What do you think?" she asked as she moved forward with the delicate lace peeking out from the bodice. "Do you think it will do?"

The bits of white contrasted beautifully with the light mint-colored silk. "It looks very nice and adds the perfect touch to set off the fabric."

"Does it not? It is simply wonderful!" She skipped over to the tall jewelry armoire and pulled out a drawer. "Now, what do you

think of these pearls?" she asked as she placed them around her neck. "Are they not the perfect thing?"

Ella's heart went cold. "Jillian, those are mine. They were my mother's pearls—she inherited them from her mother."

"No. Are you sure?" Jillian slipped them back off and studied the exquisite two-strand design. "I am sure these are the ones Mother bought me for my presentation at court." She turned them from side to side. "Look at the clasp." She pointed to it. "These are not antique—they are fairly new."

Ella took a deep breath and walked toward the necklace. She touched the small gold-filigreed clasp. There was a dainty rose carved in the center, the same rose that had been there for years. "I am afraid not. These are most certainly mine. Do you see this flower in the center? It was especially commissioned for my grandmother. Her name was Rose."

"Mother!" Jillian shouted unexpectedly.

Ella jumped and stepped away. "What have I done?"

Jillian refused to look at her. "Mother!"

Lady Dashlund was quick to enter the

room, her breath coming in great pants. "What—what is it, dear? Has something happened?" she asked as she reached out to steady herself upon the bedpost.

"Yes!"

Ella shook her head and began to walk backwards toward the door. How did these things always occur to her? Why could she not remember that she had no say in this house? She could be such a fool sometimes.

Jillian pointed to Ella and held the necklace out for her mother to see. "Do you see this? *Cinder*-Ella—"

Ella winced as Jillian used the horrid nickname.

"—was trying to steal my pearls!"

"No." Ella shook her head once more and brought her hands out to try to defuse the situation. "No, I was not. I was simply stating—"

"You filthy liar! Mother, she is telling as many falsehoods as she can to gain all the control within this house. It is ridiculous."

"No, Lady Dashlund, I promise—"

"Silence!" her stepmother bellowed, her nostrils flaring. She took a calming

breath. "Now, Jillian, my dear, tell me what happened. Start from the beginning so that I may ascertain the punishment required for this. Tell me everything."

Jillian's bottom lip began to shake, and Ella willed herself not to roll her eyes at the dramatics offered upon display by her spoiled stepsister.

"I was showing Ella my gown and the pretty lace we had acquired to go with it and she was admiring it and approving. So I decided to be nice and continue to talk to her and treat her as I should—you are always saying we should tolerate those below us to demonstrate that we are true ladies. Well, that is what I determined to do. I went to my jewelry case and pulled out these beautiful pearls, the ones you gave me for my presentation at court. And then Cinder-Ella—" she pointed at Ella, "declared them to be her pearls. *Hers*! Saying they had been commissioned for her grandmother named Rose. And I know they were not! I know it! They are mine! And she would have taken them—I know she would have with her convincing lies. But I would not fall prey

to such madness—I called you immediately so you may see for yourself how your stepdaughter has chosen to disgrace us again."

Lady Dashlund's impatient gaze met Ella's. "Is this true?" she asked coldly.

"I, uh—not exactly."

"Would you like a moment to speak for yourself so you may convince me of your innocence, or would you prefer to leave things as they are and allow me to punish you now?"

Ella knew from past experience that to defend herself would indeed secure a much harsher punishment than if she allowed the one testimony to stand on its own. She knew she should keep her mouth shut, she knew it, but this time—this time she could not. She had to speak up. "Forgive me, milady, but I believe Jillian misunderstood. It did happen as she said it did, but I was only pointing out the necklace was mine—given to me by my mother, commissioned for my grandmother—and I was showing her the proof. I would not have taken it. I promise, I would not. I was only telling her it was mine, that I believed it was mine. But perhaps I was mistaken."

She should not have said that last part.

Never, ever should those words have left her mouth. Her stepmother's eyes snapped to hers—the fire building within their depths proved to Eleanoria just how foolish she had been. Lady Dashlund's voice was eerily calm as she hissed, "Go to your room upstairs. I will be there shortly to deal with you. My daughter does not need to witness this."

"Yes, milady." Ella curtsied quickly and dashed from the room, her feet pattering down the long corridor and up the narrow servants' stairs as she did so. Three stories later, she burst into her little attic room. To be fair, it was the nicest of the servants' quarters—the largest, at least. But it was merely a fraction of what her room had been.

She walked to the small bed and sat down upon it, her heart pounding as she processed what was coming. Lady Dashlund was never consistent in her tempers or punishments, and Ella wrung her hands as she dreaded what was to become of her. Her eyes settled upon the small white three-drawer dresser and the oil lamp that sat on it. It had been her old nurse's dresser when she was a girl, and one of the few pieces of furniture she had been allowed.

Anxious, she arose and took the few steps to the window. Pulling back the muslin curtains, she peered down below to her mother's garden. It had been her favorite place to go when she was a girl—always pretending to be with her mother, holding her hand, speaking with her, laughing with her.

Ella closed her eyes and wished as she used to do. She wished to feel her mother's warm embrace. Some days when it was particularly calm, she could almost feel her there, as if she did truly still exist and was watching over her as Father had always said.

Today, though, she did not feel comfort or calm; today she felt no happiness at all. There was nothing but stress and concern for her fate. She pulled away from the window and bent down to straighten the small tied rug at her feet. As she rose, she heard the knock and her stepmother's voice.

Chapter Five

ELLA TOOK A DEEP breath and then said, "Come in." She sat on the bed and pushed her jittery hands under her legs as her stepmother walked in the room.

Lady Dashlund looked around the small place, but did not enter all the way. She closed the door and stood by it. Her dark-brown eyes bore into Ella's for several moments—it felt like hours. Ella did not dare say a word.

Finally, she broke contact and said quietly, "What will become of you? What will you amount to? I am extremely afraid for you, Eleanoria. You are not fit to be seen in public, you cannot control yourself, you

are rude, and brash, and assume far too much for one of your station. You clearly do not have the manners of a field cat, and yet—yet, I still must house you within my home. I still must treat you with courtesy because of your father. And how do you repay me? How do you rectify all the bad things you have put me through and all the times you have worn on my patience? By continuing in this manner. No matter how many chores I give you, no matter what punishment it is, you must continually seek ways to ruin those who have cared for you." She put one hand on her hip, her voice still low and quiet.

"There is one simple thing you need to understand now. Just one. Are you listening, child?" She leaned toward Ella. "You own nothing in this house." She straightened. "Nothing. It is mine. I married your father and he left all of his possessions to me. You, unfortunately, were one of those possessions I could not part with. However, the things I felt would get too much in your way and make you continue to believe you were better than my daughters, I did take away. You did not need your own horse. You did not need the largest

room in the house. You did not need fine dresses and shoes. You did not need paints and silly collections."

Lady Dashlund walked up and put her hand upon Ella's head. Ella refused to meet her glare. Instead, she kept her eyes focused on the patchwork bedding under her as her stepmother leaned over and whispered, "You most certainly did not need your grandmother's pearls."

Ella gasped, her whole body going rigid.

"And if you are not careful, I will remind myself that you do not even need this bedroom. You can sleep near the fireplace and ashes in the kitchen and be truly a Cinderella instead." Lady Dashlund suddenly whipped her hand back and slapped Ella's cheek, the sound echoing around the room like a sharp gong. "If you ever disagree with one of my daughters again, you will lose everything. Do you understand me?" she whispered.

When Ella did not respond, she slapped her again. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Ella whispered, her cheek stinging.

"Good. And remember—things can always, always get worse." She stepped away

and walked toward the door. "Until you learn to behave around those to whom you owe your life, things will continue to be bad. Do not tempt me, Eleanoria, or you will truly know what it is like to lose all. For now, you will not eat until I say so. I want to be sure you are repentant of this little episode. Get your chores done." The door closed with a quiet, ominous click.

Ella looked at the back of the door for a minute and then brought her hand up to touch her her cheek and feel the warm skin. She knew those pearls had been her mother's. She knew it. Bringing her knuckles to her mouth, she rubbed it and willed herself not to cry. Bit by bit, she turned over and gradually crawled her way up to her pillow. Clutching the padding in front of her like a shield, she lay on her side and stared blankly at the wall. It was a mere twelve inches from her.

She held her hand out, allowing each of her fingers to touch the small bumps and cracks within the white wall. Following the lines, her fingers played absently in front of her while her mind shifted and sorted through thousands of memories to find her favorites.

The one when she was first given her sweet mare on her ninth birthday. Her father had made her wear that silly blindfold and then teased her the whole way out the door and across the graveled walk to the stables. She had no idea where she was going—she only knew it was certainly too far to be traveling blindly. But when he removed the blindfold to reveal the most beautiful horse she had ever seen—oh, the joy that had coursed through her then! The surprise—the giddiness.

Ella had dashed to the horse and wrapped her arms as far around the wide tummy as she could get them. It was only a matter of minutes before she had the perfect name. "Sunshine." She had spoken so clearly, sure of herself. "She looks just like sunshine with her golden coat, and she is quite the happiest gift I have ever been given! She will bring me sunshine every day of my life."

"So, do you like her then?" her father had asked, his hands in his coat pockets, looking mighty proud of himself. "Am I your favorite too?"

She had giggled then and run over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I love

you, Father. There is not a better father in all the world. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Not one for too much affection, he had patted her back and then pulled her up to plop her on the horse, bareback and all. Many of the stable boys and Father's friends had thought a girl just nine was too young to be given such a great big horse, but her father smiled and said, "You do not know my Ella if you think that. If there was ever a girl who could ride a big horse, it is her!"

Ella had laid her tummy right down upon that horse and wrapped her arms around the animal's neck, rubbing her face into Sunshine's golden mane. "I love you," she had whispered to the beautiful mare right then and there. "I love you so much! I have waited my whole life for my very own horse and now I have you. We will be the best of friends, I know it."

She then spread her skirts around her knees to be more ladylike, gathered up some of that glorious mane, and began to tug and walk Sunshine around the graveled yard. Wherever she wanted to go, the horse followed. It was

like they were sisters or twins—so in tune was Ella to her and Sunshine to Ella, it did not matter if Ella suddenly wanted to halt and pick an apple in the orchard, the horse would stop and allow her to stand precariously upon her back or saddle and reach up on tiptoe to collect one of the apples from the tree. Sunshine would not move one inch until Ella was seated again and tugged on her to go again.

And the way they could fly! Oh, how Ella loved to fly with Sunshine! Darting and racing through the countryside, hair blowing behind them. So free, so fast, so fun.

Ella smiled and blinked away the sudden tears that had collected in the corners of her eyes. Her fingers stilled upon the wall. One by one she removed them, staring blankly at the cracks again. John was right. She missed Sunshine—there were times she could have sworn she needed Sunshine to breathe, especially right after her father had married again. Her father had not seen the darkness that had come into the house when Lady Dashlund moved in, but she did. She felt the loathing and silliness and snide remarks almost from the beginning. But her father was

so happy and wanted Ella to be happy so very much that she never had the heart to tell him she was not. Instead, she would climb up on her Sunshine and escape for a while.

Getting out into nature, the wind, the smells, life brimming everywhere—out there, the world was perfect. Out there, everything became good again. Once she had had a good, strong ride, it was easy to come back inside and be friendly and happy and the exact way her father would have had her be. She only needed to breathe first.

Rolling onto her back, Ella stared up at the open wooden rafters of the ceiling. She frowned, her face scrunching as if she were in pain. Closing her eyes, she wished for a moment that her life was different—just for a few minutes at least. She wished the world back the way it was when she was nine, when everything was free and perfect. Now it seemed it would never be that way again.

Chapter Six

PRINCE ANTHONY STRODE INTO the palace. His boots echoed upon the marble floors and bounced off the large pillars and ornately carved ceilings as he made his way up the stairs and into his rooms. He threw off his riding coat and tossed it on the navy blue high-backed chair for Maren, his valet, to clean later. Shucking off his riding boots and trousers, he quickly changed into more suitable clothes to be worn about the palace. His mother never appreciated the reek of horse on him and insisted he change the moment he walked in the castle.

As he was tying his new cravat in a

dashing waterfall, he began the long-awaited berating of himself. He had held back the whole time Zedekiah was going on about his adventures within the Dashlunds' home and how he barely made it out alive. Which was fine—it was good that he continued to chatter and keep them both amused the length of the ride home because it allowed Anthony to sit in peace and not have to relate his own excitement and confusion. It was almost as if Zedekiah had forgotten why Anthony remained outside altogether. He would remember soon enough and have his own questions, but for now—now the prince preferred his moment to reflect on it all alone.

He pulled on his day coat and stared at himself in the mirror. Maren would be extremely vexed that he had chosen to get dressed himself and not call for him, but it was how it was. He blinked at the young man staring back in the looking glass. A man of wealth and power—he was tall, he was strong, and he was handsome enough, with his father's jaw and his mother's hazel eyes. His light brownish-blondish hair was not quite curly, nor was it straight, but it was cropped

short in the latest style. No, it was not in looks he lacked. It was in brains. There were days when he wondered at how completely idiotic he had become.

Today was one of those days.

What imbecile would invite a girl he barely knew to a ball he was helping to host whilst pretending to be someone completely different? Was he mad? Honestly? Could there be a bigger mess in all the kingdom? Zedekiah was worried about what the Dashlund girls would do—why worry about them when Anthony had managed to get himself into a much bigger tangle than either of the Dashlunds could even contemplate?

Anthony put his hand on his hip, causing the coat to flair out, and turned around. He shook his head as he took in the splendid view toward the rolling hills and nestling village below him. His room had some of the best views in the castle. Four sets of three tall windows each lined the whole length of his room. Their glorious diamond-shaped panes allowed him a chance to feel as if he were literally flying over the kingdom, as if he were looking down upon it all. In the distance,

he could make out the top of the Dashlund home. Her many fireplaces and pointed roofs did much to distinguish the large manor home from the rest of the smallish houses around it.

What should he have done? What could he have done differently? Other than, of course, not invite her. But she needed out. She needed a chance to remember the world again and see it for the good that it was. To be forever shut in a home leads to too much silliness and graveness. Her thoughts needed to be light again. She needed to step into the world and allow them to remember her and see the great beauty she had become. She needed to laugh and play and have enjoyment again. This oddity that she would work and dress like a servant only proved his theory that she was not allowing herself a moment to live.

To be forever in mourning could not be healthy. Her life had been hard. It must be extremely difficult to live with such a family, especially when her own father and mother had been so superior. And not to have a horse? Not to be able to ride and escape the world for a moment? He shook his head. Ella needed a horse like he needed sustenance. He loved

his horses—he always had—but she was born on one. Never had he seen a rider use the techniques and skills she had—and at such a young age! To be so naturally gifted.

What a cruel thing to do to the girl—shortly after her father dies, her horse is taken too! He could not fathom what would have possessed Lady Dashlund to justify such a thing. It made no sense. Did the woman not know how much the horse meant to her stepdaughter? How much Ella was destined to have such an animal in her life?

He sighed, pushed away from the window, and sat upon the settee near his bed. It was all a muddle. Tilting his head from side to side, he relaxed his neck from the pressures he felt mounting there. Why was he taking such an interest in the girl, anyway? Why not let things be? She seemed happy enough. Why now, of all times, should he allow himself to become immersed in someone else's problems? He had his own to worry about.

Perhaps that was the answer right there. Perhaps by focusing on Ella, he could give himself a respite from trying to solve his father's affairs. Heaven knew he needed a

respite from that—his father's illness only grew worse every single day.

His mother refused to believe so, announcing loudly and convincingly to everyone that all was well with the king, that he was as perfectly healthy as he had always been. But it was not so. The strain, the pain, the confusion—they were all there within his eyes, if anyone but looked closely enough to see them.

If Anthony did not get his father to open up and speak of his ailments soon, they could all lose precious time—precious time wherein a physician or herb woman could be helping him. Curse their fool pride! Curse their fear of weakness! Why? Why must the world hide behind this inane strength? Why is it so difficult for people to admit their faults? To admit when something is wrong? To live in a farce is no life at all! And yet—and yet—his father and mother were so buried within their own that they had refused to speak of it to him.

He had not been trained and counseled in the affairs of the kingdom since before he went away to school. It had been years since he knew of anything that went on—and if they

did not allow him the ability to help and learn where he could, his father would die and all the affairs would suddenly rest upon him, the affairs he knew nothing about!

How was he supposed to sustain and maintain this great land and all of her people when those who loved it most were not willing to allow him to do so? He ran his fingers through his hair and rested his elbows upon his knees, his hands clasped together supporting his forehead.

His father was dying. The great king was not so great anymore.

Oh, how he loved that man! How he needed him. The king could not go—not yet. He could not leave them now. The queen would surely collapse; her love was so strong, so perfect, so true. Anthony had never seen a bond like they had. He could not ever imagine one so pure.

Ugh. He knew that was why they insisted upon this ball—they needed their son to find a wife and settle down. Ha. Like he could just pick in a hat and choose a name and be forever grateful to her for accepting his hand and live happily ever after. It did not work that way.

Not all love could be as bonded as his parents'.

No, he needed time, he needed patience—he needed to truly learn to trust and accept a woman before he could fall in love with her, let alone begin to think about living his life with her.

He smirked. Perhaps that was why he chose to hang about the ball with Eleanoria Woodston. It gave him the perfect excuse to hide from those he was expected to fall in love with and instead, bring happiness to someone who needed it most.

His heart warmed. It was perhaps a very good thing indeed he had decided to help someone instead of worrying about his own upsets. He needed a release from life—and this Ella, with her no-nonsense and frank ways, was the perfect girl to help him achieve such a thing. He stood up and grabbed his nice leather boots from the armoire. He tugged them on and hastened out of his room and down the stairs. It was time he found his mother—there was a ball invitation he needed to secure and deliver tomorrow.

Chapter Seven

ELLA WAS IN THE rear kitchens helping the lower servants make currant tarts when the knock from the footman sounded. "Miss Eleanoria Woodston, His Lordship John is here to see you. He is waiting in the back, in the orchard, if you wish to accompany him."

The other two maids' eyes were round as Ella wiped her hands upon her apron. "Thank you, Paul. Could you kindly see that no one else is aware of his presence?" she asked.

Paul grinned widely and pulled out a large gold coin. "Oh, he made sure of that already. Gave me this to keep silent to them upstairs."

"Thank you."

"I would have done so anyway—you know I would have—but to get a prize such as this! Ho! I could not pass it up."

"You best be sharing with us all, or you will not be seeing any of these tarts," teased one of the maids.

"I could buy me a whole cartload of tarts with this pretty piece!"

The girls laughed as Ella slipped out of the back kitchen and to the door that led to the orchard. She had traveled several feet alongside the outbuildings before she noticed she still wore her apron. She whisked it off and ran her hand over her hair to smooth and tuck the wayward wisps into her bun. She could not for the life of her fathom why John would come again to see her so soon. Her heart sped up a few notches as she rounded the corner and made out his form resting against an apple tree a few rows behind the others. He sat on the ground as if he had done so a hundred times—as if he belonged there.

"What brings you here?" she asked as she sat down next to him, curling her feet under her dress.

"Forgive me!" John sat up straighter. "I

did not hear you coming. I was lost in my own thoughts or I would have stood."

Ella laughed. "Goodness, I have not been around such manners for years. I sincerely did not think a thing about it."

"Well, you should. It is rude of me not to perform that custom when a lady approaches."

She grinned and raised her eyebrows. "So does this mean I must wait for you to stand and sit back down before you tell me what it is that has you coming back to the house so soon?"

"Well, when you put it that way…" He pulled an envelope out of his coat pocket. "Here, this is for you."

"Me?" She held the pretty missive in her hand and flipped it over. On one side, her name scrolled in an elegant script across the front, and on the back was a green wax seal with the royal emblem molded into it. "The invitation to the ball. I had nearly forgotten about this. You did it, then?"

He smiled and turned slightly toward her. "Open it and see for yourself."

Inside there was indeed a very formal invitation to the royal ball, with distinct

addresses to her and her only. "You amaze me! When you said you would be able to do this, I was not quite ready to believe you—and yet, here it is, one day later, and the invitation is in my hand."

"So, will you go to the ball with me? I will not be able to come right as it starts at eight o'clock because I have other duties, but perhaps I could bring my coach and pick you up at half past nine. Would that be agreeable? You are welcome to stay as long as you wish. And then I will bring you back home again."

Her fingers traced the graceful swirls of the letters. "You are very serious. You mean for me to attend?"

"Yes."

She looked up, searching his eyes for clues. "And you will truly go to all that trouble, just for me?"

He was about to protest that it was no trouble at all, but instead he answered, "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I think you need it. Because I have missed you. And because the ball will

be exceedingly boring without you, and so it is worth it to travel all the way here to fetch you to guarantee I will have someone to laugh with."

"I really do not prefer to dance."

"That is fine; you need not if you do not wish to."

She took a deep breath and glanced up at him, then looked at the bark of the tree across. "It is not that I do not wish to. I was never taught how."

"*You* were never taught how to dance? Lord Dashlund's daughter was not taught how to dance?"

"I—uh," she began, and then fiddled with the invitation a bit. "No. My stepmother preferred dancing lessons taught while I had my riding lessons. At first I did not know about it, and when I did find out, my father was so hurt and upset that I had been excluded he was nearly shouting down the rafters—and so I told him it was not necessary to become so irate, as I simply did not wish to learn."

"What did your father say to that?"

"He was not happy, as you can imagine, but he was grateful that all was well. He could

not bear to see me harmed in any way and he was mostly angry on my part, believing that I was."

"And were you?"

"Angry?"

"No, harmed by their actions."

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Her hands tightened their hold, nearly crushing the small envelope. "No," she whispered.

"Eleanoria Woodston."

"Yes?"

Her eyes met his and he struggled with the weight of harmful acts he saw hidden within them. She had been hurt. She was suffering now from the actions of her family. And yet she kept it hidden. Just as his own mother and father balanced their fears, she suffered the same. There was so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to pry out of her, but instead he asked, "Would you like to dance?"

She blinked and then chuckled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Come on, you," he said as he stood up and brushed off the dirt. He held one hand out to her. "It will be fun. And you will enjoy every moment of your very first dancing

lesson."

She rolled her eyes, set her apron upon the ground, and clasped his hand. "So, now you are an instructor as well as an outrider?"

He tugged her closer and captured her waist with his other hand. "I have many talents you do not know about."

"I cannot believe I am allowing you to do this," she muttered.

He smiled. "You will love this."

"I believe I shall dread it."

"Ah!" he gasped, allowing a mock wounded look to go across his features. "How could you say such a thing? I am in high demand at all the balls."

"Are you really?" She grinned and raised an eyebrow. "This proves my theory of how royalty behaves, if it is *you* who is in high demand and not the prince. I do not think I would like to go after all."

He pulled her in tighter and winked. "No getting out of it. You must come and suffer with me."

"Just remember that if I destroy your feet, it is your own fault."

"I have been duly warned." He laughed.

"Now, shall we begin?"

Ella bit her lip and stifled a giggle. "Yes, please."

"Good. Now, on the count of three, I will begin to move. I will still be counting aloud, but all you need to do is look in my eyes. Stay focused there and trust me. I will do the rest."

"Is that really how you dance? The woman just follows the man?"

"Yes, basically, as long as you have a very good dancing partner." He cleared his throat and waggled his brows. "As you do, this will be a piece of cake for you—almost like floating on air."

She did giggle that time. "Well, then, I believe this might not be so bad after all."

"Ella, my dear, you will soon learn that being with me is the easiest thing in the world."

"Hmm…" She tilted her head. "And I thought beating you was the easiest thing in the world."

John chuckled. "Minx. Now, let us begin."

Chapter Eight

ELLA HELD HER PLAIN dress out with one hand as John took a step forward with his right foot, pushing slightly against her waist with his fingers. She stepped back with her left foot and then over to the right as he again guided her. She stumbled a couple of times, but he was correct—after a very slow start and with a somewhat awkward rhythm, they were truly able to begin to dance.

"Do not look down. Keep your eyes on me," he said.

She giggled and stared right into his captivating eyes with those long blondish eyelashes. He really was quite handsome. He

always had been. Even as a boy when he was angry with her for winning, he was still handsome. After a few minutes, she asked, "Why is it that men seem to have the prettiest eyelashes? 'Tis not fair."

Grinning, John replied as he increased his speed a bit, "So that is what you were thinking about just now? How long my lashes are? And here I was quite positive you were enamored with the way I dance."

Mirth trickled out in a long series of chuckles that made her lose her footing. "Pardon me!" she exclaimed as she trod upon his boots. "I am impressed with your dancing—or rather, your ability to teach me to dance. However, I am more amazed by your eyelashes."

"Of course you would be!"

"You may take it as a compliment."

"How so?"

The thoughts swirled within her mind. *Because you are wonderful. Because your eyes are beautiful and I cannot look away.* Her smile dropped. "Because it means a girl is close enough to see your face and is not looking from a distance to admire your

dancing. She is actually seeing and admiring *you*."

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. "And is Miss Ella Woodston admitting she is admiring me?"

Ella blushed and looked down, their feet dipping and swirling through the grass of the orchard. "No. What a foolish thing to believe. I was merely stating the difference between the two."

"Ella?"

"What?"

"Look at me."

"No."

"Ella, please?" He slowly brought their steps to a halt.

Her eyes climbed his cravat and coat with her right fingers tucked into his—and his other hand warmly on her waist. "Yes?"

"Look all the way up, please. I would like to see *your* eyelashes."

"Can you not see them just the way they are now?"

"Against your reddened cheeks, yes. But I wish to see them with your lively eyes staring back at me."

She could not explain why, but all of a sudden, her breathing grew more rapid and the sensation of his nearness was overwhelming and unexpected. "I would rather not."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"Ella?" He let go of her waist and tucked his finger under her chin.

Instinctively, she stiffened and pulled back.

He dropped his hand. "Forgive me. I did not mean to startle you. I would never force you to do something against your will—I hope you realize that."

She was such a fool. Why did she have to be so skittish? Ella nodded and then brought her eyes up to his.

He inhaled sharply.

She did not know what he saw within them, but his own face took on a look of such sorrow.

"Thank you," he said. "You do not trust many people, do you? So, I thank you."

This was simply too mortifying. He could read her like a book. "I—I should probably go now."

John captured her hand before she could

run off. "Please do not leave because of my impertinence. You are not the same as the women at court. You are different."

Her heart went cold. "What are you implying?"

"No, I did not mean it that way." He cleared his throat. "I meant that your manners are more pleasing, more fresh and natural. You have not mastered the artifice that many of the other women have."

Warily, Ella's eyes traced his features. He seemed happy and earnest enough. "And this is something good—it is good to be different?"

He sighed. "Yes! Yes, more than you could ever imagine. Oh, Ella, I get so bored with the incessant chatter of the court—the games and rudeness and constant tiptoeing about everywhere you go so as not to say the wrong thing to the wrong person who will construe it in completely the opposite of what you meant."

"Oh!" She laughed forcefully and then replied, "So, akin to what has been occurring with us at the moment?"

"Yes." He nodded and grinned. "Yes. With you, I know it is simply a cultural

difference, something I must explain away so you understand what I truly mean. There—there it is a constant battle of confusions and loyalties and naysayers. Truth be told, it is exhausting."

She looked down at their entwined fingers. "So why attend court if you cannot abide it?"

"I must. It is my life—my, er, situation as an outrider and special companion to the duke to be present everywhere he goes." He nudged her hand, swinging it a bit. "Honestly, I would much rather be here with you than anywhere else in this kingdom."

Gasping, her eyes flew to his. "You would? But why?"

His smile softened. "I do not know. There is something about you that tugs at me, though. Something safe and warm and easy. Something that makes me forget my future and all the silliness surrounding life and her trials. No, you are so very different from the women at court that I find myself relieved and grateful to have reconnected with you again." He brought her hand up and, bowing over it, kissed her knuckles. His soft lips caressed her skin, causing a series of tingles and warmth

to spread into her palm and up to her elbow before he straightened himself. "Eleanoria Woodston, may I call again soon?"

She knew she should tell him no. She knew that once her stepmother got wind that she was entertaining a man—even if he were an old friend—if she learned about any of this, Ella would surely be punished worse than before. "I do not know if I dare."

"What are you saying?" he asked.

What *was* she saying? She nearly revealed to him her biggest secret. "'Tis nothing—I was merely worried about having a visitor so very much. It might make it more difficult for me to—for me to…" Her voice trailed off as she tried desperately to think of something suitable to say.

"Prepare for the ball?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes!" Ella smiled. "Yes, precisely. I must make a gown, and therefore, it will take up quite a bit of my time."

"I see. Well, perhaps on the off chance that you change your mind, I will be out here in the orchard tomorrow around two o'clock, if you would like to see me then."

Her jaw dropped. "At two o'clock?"

"Yes."

She swung her arm wide. "Out here. In *our* orchards?"

"Exactly here." He grinned, looking pleased with himself.

"But—but here? What will you do out here?"

"Why, wait for you, of course."

"John!" she protested.

"What?"

"Well, what if I cannot make it?"

"Then I shall entertain myself, I suppose."

"But what if I *can* come? Then what?"

"Are you asking what we will do to occupy ourselves?"

"Yes."

"Why, dance, of course. I have many more steps to teach you."

When she could not reply, her mouth completely forgetting how to work properly, he said, "So, perhaps tomorrow, then?"

"I—"

He chuckled and brushed his lips over her hand again. "Goodbye, fair Ella. I shall await you tomorrow."

And then he was gone.

Chapter Nine

"ELLA, DO YOU THINK the duke will ever like me?" Lacey asked as she gathered her ball-gown petticoat from the floor and set it on her pretty pink bed. How she wished he would.

Ella removed the needle that was in her mouth and answered, "I do not know. I hope for your sake he does."

Lacey sighed and sat herself, with crossed legs—a very unladylike position—upon the bed next to where Ella worked. Ella had been attaching rows and rows of new lace to the petticoat all morning and yet, she still was not done. "Do you need help?" Lacey surprised

herself by asking. "It looks very tedious. Perhaps there is a simple chore I can do for you, such as cutting the ribbon." She glanced over at the spools of trimming her mother had bought earlier.

Ella seemed amazed by her willingness to help, but did not comment on it. "I will begin tying the bows in about thirty minutes or so. If you would like to start cutting them, I would be very appreciative."

"Perfect," Lacey exclaimed as she searched the room for the scissors. "How long should I make each one?"

"If you take the ribbon from the tip of your finger to your elbow, it should be plenty."

"Oh, I think I could do that." Lacey collected a spool and began to measure and snip the smooth purple fabric. "How many strips should I make?"

Ella pulled the bunches of white lace in front of her, and then laid them out upon the bed. "Perhaps twenty?" She stretched out the ruffles and then shook her head. "Better make it thirty."

"Goodness! That is a lot of bows."

"Well, you have one of the largest

petticoats I have ever worked on." Ella smiled and fluffed the layers up a bit. "It is quite stunning, though. It will create a lovely silhouette for your gown. And with the peek-a-boo petticoat running around the whole of the dress, it will be very breathtaking. I am sure the duke will not help but notice you."

Lacey giggled. "Do you really think so?" There was nothing she wanted more than for Lord Gavenston to become aware of her and possibly ask her to dance. If only she could figure a way not to do such silly things in front of him. Lacey grimaced as she snipped another length of ribbon. The poor man was more than likely terrified of her. "I will never be able to get him to see me as a person, as someone to court, will I?"

Ella mumbled something Lacey could not understand and then asked, "How was your meeting with him the other day? Did it go well? Did he seem interested in you?"

Lacey groaned and set down the scissors. It would be impossible to concentrate on cutting ribbon if she had to answer such questions. Bringing her knees up, she wrapped her arms around her legs and rested

her head on top. "It was a disaster. Just an awful disaster."

"What do you mean? What happened?" Ella found the last spot of lace that still needed to be attached and began stitching. "I thought everything went well. At least, I had not heard of anything amiss."

Lacey groaned again. "Oh, joy! It is nice to know the servants speak of such things to you."

"Well, it is hard to ignore when the whole house is attempting to clean up some mess or other," Ella said as she added a few more fine stitches.

"Stop, please, stop." Lacey was going to cry—something that rarely happened. But she had never wanted anything more in her life than the charming duke, and now it seemed it would never transpire. Ever. More than likely, she was the mockery of the whole village.

"Lacey, do not worry. I am sure it is not as bad as it seems."

"No. I am sure it is much worse after what happened on Wednesday."

"Would you like to tell me what took

place with Lord Gavenston?"

"No."

"Very well, you do not need to speak of it." Ella slipped the needle into the lace and gave it one final tug before reaching for the scissors and clipping the thread. She shook the petticoat out in front of her. "That came together much quicker than I thought. Now to begin attaching the ribbons."

Lacey watched her stepsister deftly cut several strips of ribbon within moments. As the quiet of the room came upon her while she watched Ella work, Lacey suddenly burst out, "I pushed him over and kissed him."

Ella dropped the ribbon and nearly lost the scissors as well. "You did what?"

Lacey took a deep breath and looked straight ahead. "I was attempting to pour the tea. It was not as if I truly meant to crash upon him and for all those tea things to land upon us both and to upset the sofa cushions in the process. No, I had simply gone to pour Lord Gavenston a cup, and as I leaned over to do so, I somehow managed to get my foot caught up under my dress, which caused me to stumble just that little bit. I caught my balance upon

the tea cart, which was not properly positioned to support my weight, so it rolled right out from underneath me as the platter tumbled to the floor. My hands flew about every which way as I tried to maintain some balance or dignity.

"Well, I was already pitching forward, so it would make perfect sense as to why I would lunge upon the duke. It happened so fast—one moment I was standing, serene and eager to pour him a cup of tea, and the next instant I was sprawled upon him on the settee. But I still could not gain my balance as I wished, with my foot tucked up inside my gown. So when Lord Gavenston began to slip off the couch with the added weight and angle of my person, I tried all I could to scramble up to guarantee I would not cause him to crash upon the ground. It was in vain, however, for I did manage to land us both in a pile of arms and legs and cushions and tea things. And then when I did look up and found him staring at me with this shaken look upon his features, I did the only thing I could to distract him. I kissed him—quite forcefully—on the lips."

"You—you kissed him forcefully?" Ella

asked.

"Yes. Quite."

"And what does 'forcefully' imply?"

Lacey sighed and scrunched up her mouth. "It means that I had gotten so caught up in the moment of actually kissing him—I mean, kissing *the* Lord Gavenston—that I may have smashed his lips into his teeth, causing him to wince in pain." She looked over at her stepsister.

Ella winced. "My goodness," was all that she said.

"Yes, well, it does not matter how beautiful I look in my gown. I am afraid the duke will only run from me." Lacey placed her chin upon her knees. "Why must I act like such a buffoon when he is around? Why is it that every single thing that *could* go wrong *does* go wrong when he is there? I do not understand my bad luck." She threw her hands in the air. "How he must despise me. How he must laugh at me when I am not present. There are certainly days when I loathe myself and this exciting ability to play the fool." Lacey attempted to stop it, but the first tear trickled down her cheek.

"Lacey…" Ella whispered, her heart going out to her. "It is well. It will all be well."

"Will it?"

"Yes. It must. If he is meant to be your true love, you will know it. Such atrocities will stop happening and all will work in your favor. Or, if they never do stop happening, he will love you despite them."

Lacey chuckled. "I do not believe anyone would love me and the silliness I bring them."

"Someone will. Do not give up hope; it will all turn out. You will see." Ella picked up the ribbons and began to tie the first one into a pretty bow and then had a thought. "Lacey, will you please bring me the gown you were wearing the other day? The one that made you trip? Perhaps it just needs some mending."

"Oh, thank you!" Lacey jumped up and rushed to the closet. "Mayhap you can figure out what happened." She rummaged through several dresses as she spoke. "Mother was so upset with me, as you can imagine, that I had to stay in my room until supper."

Ella's own stomach had been rumbling

greatly the past several hours. Her stepmother still had not given her permission to eat a full meal. Though the maids had been sneaking her bits of bread and cheese and small pieces of dried fruit, it was not enough.

"Here it is." Lacey pulled the cheerful yellow-and-white dress from the closet and brought it over.

Ella collected the bows she had already tied from her lap and set them on the ground. Then she took the gown and held up the inside hem for inspection. Just as she thought, the hem had been stripped. And it most definitely did not look like an accident. No, this was the work of someone intent on making Lacey seem appalling to the duke.

Someone like Jillian.

Chapter Ten

"AND WHERE DO YOU think you are going, my son?"

Anthony turned around in the doorframe and smiled as his mother approached. "Just out for a ride, nothing more."

"A ride?" She grinned and raised an eyebrow. "A ride and nothing else? Dressed as fine as you are? You are most certainly not going out for a ride."

It was uncanny how well the woman could read him. "Yes, I am."

"Who is she?"

He stared at her blankly. "Who?"

She chuckled and put her hand on her

elegant hip, her red sleeve flaring out as she did so. "The girl you are so keen on visiting. The same girl you went to see yesterday."

He sighed and looked at his fingernails, attempting his best pretense at boredom. "Mother, I have no idea what you are referring to."

"Of course you do." She walked up to him. "Now, Anthony, are you going to tell me about her, or do I have to ferret it out by other means?"

Good heavens. She would call upon all her friends and the merry busybodies of court to spy upon him. Then word would be out within a heartbeat that he had been playing tribute to the long-lost daughter of Alan Woodston, Lord Dashlund. And then Ella would do no less than murder him for never telling her that he was a prince, and then his father would have no one to turn the kingdom over to when his health failed him. "How is Father doing today?" he asked instead of answering her questions.

His mother bit her lip to stifle the grin that was even now apparent upon her features. "Why do you not give up this girl and go see

for yourself? He could use some company. Unless, of course, you would prefer to stay and chat with me…"

Anthony stared into his mother's playful eyes. She had to be a witch, the way she could read his mind so well. He heaved a huge breath of air and walked back into the richly decorated sitting room. Plopping onto one of the gold velvet chairs, he waited for his mother to join him, her gown splaying out as she sat daintily upon the seat across from him, before he asked, "What would you like to know?"

"Everything."

"Such as?"

She laughed. "Who she is. Where she is from. Who is her family? Just typical, everyday conversation starters would be best."

"Mother, I am not in love with the girl, so it is of no importance whether or not you know who she is."

"Hmm…" She gave him an arch look and sat more comfortably in her chair. "You are not in love with her? You are sure?"

"Of course! I hardly know the woman."

She raised her chin a notch while watching him a moment and then asked, "How

did you come across this girl you do not love, yet smile like a fool when you are sneaking out to meet her?"

"Mother!" He chuckled and shook his head. "You are incorrigible. I do not smile like a fool."

"Yes, I am sure it is not quite like a fool, for how could my handsome son be considered to look anything like that?"

"How indeed?" He smirked. All he needed to do was stand next to Ella for a good quarter of an hour and he would feel the fool soon enough.

"What are you smiling about? What have you remembered just now?"

He shook his head, setting his thoughts aside. "Your words reminded me how this *girl* you are eager to learn of often puts me in my place and reminds me to watch how I present myself."

"Does she now?" The queen reached for the little bell on the table near her elbow and rang for tea.

He watched as she spoke to the footman, ordering their refreshments. She really was a very beautiful woman. Time had smiled

kindly upon her. Her eyes, though clouded with the strain of the secret illness, were still sharp, and her mannerisms were all that were graceful and lovely.

She soon turned back to him and said, "I do believe I would like to meet someone—especially someone who can keep my son in his place."

He shrugged. "Mayhap you would be fond of her. I do not know. As I said earlier, I do not know her well enough to decide if *I* like her."

"Is there a reason you should not?"

"She is not a spy from one of the neighboring kingdoms, if that is what you are implying." He rested one foot upon his knee and put his hands together. "She is simply a girl."

"So what are you doing with her that is so clandestine, so very secretive that your own mother must pry it out of you?"

"You are not prying anything out of me. And it is truly not that big of an issue."

"Anthony! She is closeting herself with this kingdom's heir, and you say that this is not that big of an issue?"

"She is not closeting herself with anyone—do not jump to conclusions, Mother. Besides, she does not even know who I am."

The queen's mouth fell open for a few moments before she caught herself and clamped it shut. Leaning over, she whispered "You mean to tell me there is a girl who lives within riding distance who has no idea you are the prince?"

"Not a clue."

"Anthony!"

"What?"

"Is she a servant of some sort?"

"I do not know." He frowned. "She should not be, and yet, I wonder if she is being treated as such."

"Just a moment. Are you aware of who this girl is? Who her family is?"

"Of course. So are you—which is precisely the main reason why I prefer not to tell you about her."

"Because of her family?"

"Just so."

She threw her hands in the air and then folded them, her small foot tapping upon the ground. "Anthony, if you are delving into

some family you know would not meet with my approval, I suggest you stop this at once."

He stood up as the footman pushed in the tea cart. "But I cannot, Mother."

"Why?"

Walking over to her, he placed a kiss on her cheek. "Because what if I *am* in love? I could not simply abandon the love of my life, now could I?"

"You are insubordinately impertinent."

He grinned down at her and waggled his brows. "I know."

"Anthony?"

"Yes?" he asked as he swiped a tart off the silver platter and plopped it in his mouth.

She watched him chew for a few seconds and then said, "You will always have my blessing if you truly love her."

"I know," he said as he pilfered another tart and took a bite.

"But, Anthony?"

"Hmm?"

"Be careful with her heart, please. If you do not love her, do not continue meeting with her. You are quite charming, and could make any woman fall in love with you. Do

not accidentally use this gift to harm someone whose heart is already fragile. If you believe she is being treated as a servant—"

"I know, Mother." He quickly placed another kiss upon her cheek and stole a few more tarts at the same time. "I promise not to break her heart."

"Good." She turned to collect her plate and gasped at the mayhem he had caused with the tray. The few tarts and sandwiches left were scattered about. "Be gone, you! Go meet your secret girl. And if you are not staying for tea, then kindly stay out of my refreshments."

He grinned and went to grab one more, his other hand full, but she smacked his knuckles and shooed him. "Go, get. We will speak of this more tonight."

Anthony laughed as he turned to go and lightly jogged out of the room. "I love you," he called behind him.

His mother's voice followed him as it echoed down the hall. "You'd better, you ungrateful wretch!"

He laughed harder.

Chapter Eleven

ELLA WASHED HER FACE with water from the chipped basin on her dresser. It was nearly two o'clock and her chores were finally complete. Patting her face dry with the ragged cloth that hung upon a nail on her wall, she looked around her room. How she wished she had something prettier to wear. Something that would allow John to see her a bit differently. It was quite silly, she knew, to be forever thinking of the man. His presence meant nothing in her life, except perhaps a small change, an excitement that was not there before.

She hung the cloth back on the nail and

took the pins from her hair. He was the means of the impossible. He was causing her to have hopes and dreams she did not need, dreams that were even now beginning to clutter up her mind.

Taking her old comb, she began to smooth out her long hair. If only she could escape this house. If only she could one day meet a man who would love her and take her away from here. He need not be like John—so very tall and handsome and a part of the court. He could very well be a nice farmer who hoped to start his own farm somewhere, someone who was used to working the land—someone who perhaps would not mind so very much owning a horse or two.

Ella's hands paused in her combing. Every now and then, a very impractical thing happened when she was alone in her room and not forever busy with chores, or errands, or the stresses of life. When all was quiet, a great sadness would come over her. It would almost debilitate and hamper the goodness that swelled within her heart. When those times came, she would try so very hard to focus on the gladness that was in her life—the joy

she felt when another of the maids would get married or have a child. Or when she was able to help cure an old man's rheumatism before Lady Dashlund knew he was having difficulties working. When she was able to use her gift of sewing and piece together several scraps of leftover fabric to form a beautiful blanket or tablecloth or centerpiece for someone's birthday. She tried so desperately to focus on all that was good, all that she was capable of creating, and to keep the melancholy at bay.

Though, some days, the sadness would come anyway. And those were the days when she would need to lie upon her bed and focus and bring back cheerful times—to relive those days when all was bright and clear and happy. It was an old game that worked quite well at keeping darkness away.

But today, today with John coming soon, the game had a different impact upon her. She could no longer focus on the glorious things happening now, nor could she focus on the past. For the first time ever, she wanted to focus upon a future. A change. A difference in her life. John was allowing her to see and

think and breathe past just living—he was teaching her to hope again, to believe that altering her circumstance was possible.

But with that hope and need for change came the hardest part of all—the realization that she was *not* content, that she truthfully needed to leave this life behind and step forward. This was not the life the daughter of Lord Dashlund should be living. She should be free, not a prisoner forced to work for those who would not care for her.

She began to comb out her hair again, very slowly.

If she still had Sunshine, would she be here now?

Or would she have run far away?

Urgh. This was utter idiocy. It was madness to continue to imagine a difference in her life. No. She combed more vigorously until all the tangles were out. It was much better to focus on the present. To see the joy now. To learn how to live once again in the midst of melancholy.

Ella wrapped her long hair around her hand and began to twist it up high upon her head as she looked out the window to the

pretty garden below. The world was certainly a better place amongst all those flowers. She reached over to her dresser and began to slip the pins back into her smooth bun and glanced to the left, past the rooftops of the outbuildings to the tips of the blooming apple orchard she could make out behind them.

There was happiness.

Waiting within those trees was a happiness she had not known in years—someone who remembered her from before. Someone who saw her as a person, not a servant or someone to be ordered about. She smiled and giggled a bit. Would he really teach her new dance steps today? Would he truly come as he said he would?

What if he did not come?

Just then, she saw the flicker of a horse coming down the lane to the right of the property. Her heart began to thud. Was it foolish to become this excited to see someone? She twirled around and rummaged quickly through the couple of frocks that hung in her closet. Whisking off the simple apron and dark gray dress she wore, she slipped on a plain blue one. Its long sleeves and high

neck had no ruffle or adornment at all, but it tucked in nicely at the waist and it was a bit brighter and more colorful than the other. She quickly laced up her nicer boots and found an old piece of wide pink ribbon to tie about her middle, allowing the ends of the bow to fall behind.

She did not have a looking glass in her room, but she hoped she at least appeared more presentable than before. Another rummage through the closet brought her up empty of anything else. She only owned two gray dresses and the blue, as well as the pink ribbon, two sets of old boots, a shawl for colder days—and a never-ending collection of aprons to protect the few dresses she had. Quickly, she hung the gray dress up on a peg in the back of the closet and tucked the old boots inside too. Once everything was neat, she began to shut the door, but then saw something glint within the cracks of the wooden floor.

What was that?

Stooping down, she poked and prodded and pried free an old brass key. She gasped. Holding it within her palm, her mind searched

through countless memories, trying to place the thing. Where had she seen it before? It looked so familiar. But what was it doing up in the attic rooms? It was almost as if it were something very important, but she could not remember what.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door.

She jumped."Ella? Ella, are you in there?" asked her stepmother.

Frantically, Ella looked around for a place to hide the key. "Yes," she replied as she slipped it into her boot.

Lady Dashlund opened the door just as Ella stood up. Her stepmother's gaze went from the top of her smooth bun all the way down to her boots. "And where do you believe you are heading, dressed in such a fashion?"

Ella gulped.

Chapter Twelve

"WELL, ANSWER ME, GIRL!" Lady Dashlund stepped into the room.

Ella moved a pace or two back. "I was just trying on this gown, searching for different options."

"For?"

"I—uh…" Her hands began to shake. What could she say? Her mind went blank.

"Well, speak up! You were trying on a gown instead of doing your chores because..."

"Oh, my chores are done! I finished them a quarter of an hour ago."

"Ella, if you are finished with your work so early in the day, perhaps I need more ways

to keep you occupied from wasting time in your room." She took another step forward. "Why are you dressed like you are? And why are you hiding it from me?"

"I—I was hoping I could go to the ball," Ella blurted out.

"You?" Lady Dashlund gave a sharp bark of laughter. "*You* were hoping to go to the ball? You, who have never been presented at court, hoped to attend one of the most elite galas of the year? Incredulous!" She threw out her arm. "And what did you want to wear? This?"

"I—uh, well, I do not have anything else."

"No, no, you do not." She chuckled and put her hand on her hip. "And why do you believe you would be wanted at such an assembly?"

"I do not believe I would be wanted, necessarily. I was just wishing to go. Perhaps to stay in the background and watch."

"Oh, Eleanoria, do you have any idea how pathetic you sound? Any at all?"

Ella looked away.

"Of course you do not." Lady Dashlund then surprised Ella by saying, "What is that?"

She followed her stepmother's gaze to the ball invite setting upon her dresser. "I—oh." She wanted to lie, but knew it would be futile. "It is an invitation to the ball."

"A *what*?" Lady Dashlund stormed to the dresser and grabbed the missive. Reading it over, she gasped and waved it about. "How did you come by such a thing? Who sent this to you?"

"The queen."

"Yes, I see that. You are specifically invited and mentioned here. But why would she do such a thing? How does she know of you?"

Ella's knees began to quiver. She knew she must protect John at all costs. "I do not know. I received it from a castle servant the other day."

Her stepmother whirled around, her skirts whipping about her legs. "Why would the queen request your presence, of all people, in a specific inquiry? It makes no sense." She shook her head. "Though you will have to attend."

Ella's heart stopped. "I will?"

"Of course you will!" Lady Dashlund

spun back around. "And you must wear one of your stepsisters' dresses. That one simply will not do."

"I must?"

"Yes! Do you think the queen would want the daughter of Alan Woodston to be dressed as a servant at the ball? Yes. I must, to save face, allow you to wear something decent. Though, heaven knows you will more than likely ruin the thing with your hideous manners."

"Oh, Stepmother! Thank you!" Ella rushed forward to hug her and then awkwardly halted, clasping her hands in front of herself instead.

Lady Dashlund sneered. "Do not become too eager in your thanks. You will first pay for the right to attend such an event and wear such costly apparel. And you will be forced to attend etiquette lessons as well." She sighed. "Such an inconvenience, but I suppose it is well I saw this invitation, for who knows what would become of us all if I had not."

"Would something have happened if I did not attend?" Ella had not thought of this.

"Eleanoria, if the queen has specifically

invited you to attend, you go. And until we understand her reasons, one must not assume anything but that she has commanded, albeit nicely, your attendance." She tapped her finger upon her mouth. "Though, someone has brought your name forward. Someone has made her remember Lord Dashlund's daughter—there is something amiss here. And when I find that culprit, the one who is clearly wreaking havoc with us all, when I find what lark they are playing at, they will pay."

Ella remained silent, not even daring to breathe out loudly. Clearly her stepmother did not apprehend she was speaking of such things openly.

After a few more moments of mutterings in the same vein, Lady Dashlund blinked and glanced over at Ella. She motioned with her hand to leave the room. "Go. Get something to eat. I came up here to speak with you and invite you to partake of something."

"Thank you." Ella curtsied and brought her hand to the door. "Do you need anything?"

"I need you to be gone so that I may think!" roared Lady Dashlund as she sat down

upon the bed. "Now, go before I change my mind."

"Yes, milady."

ANTHONY PACED IN THE apple orchard as he absentmindedly tapped a fallen branch against his leg. He was fairly certain his mother knew who he had come to meet. If she had not figured it out yet, she would shortly because of the invitation. He had included a few other names so as not to seem too evident, but she had already invited them and so had only filled out one more—Ella's. She had to have known. She had to.

He stopped and flicked the branch against the trunk of the tree nearest him. Would his mother really accept Ella if he loved her? Would his father? There was no reason for them not to. Granted, she was not a princess from another kingdom to pave the way for an alliance, but she certainly came from one of the wealthiest families in the land, however unlikely that she would bring any monies with her to the marriage. Especially if Lady Dashlund had already sold her horse—there

was more than likely little or no value at all placed upon the girl. Her stepsisters, on the other hand—he shuddered—probably had very handsome dowries.

No matter. His mother had always told him that if he truly fell in love, his parents would not stop it under any means. He smiled. How he loved his father and mother. They had their faults, yes, but their hearts were so good. His father was such a generous and kind ruler. It was not fair to have one of the best hearts in the world only to lose him so soon. What did that signify? What was the point of taking such greatness from this earth when the king could do so much more alive?

Anthony's mother was asleep and so did not know that he had slipped into his father's room earlier that morning. The king did not stir when his son came to hold his hand. Not so long ago, that hand had been full of strength and valor. Now it was frail and limp.

Anthony had pressed his lips to his father's knuckles and urged him silently to get better. He needed his father—he needed this man so very much. The whole kingdom did. But even that simple act, the act of holding his

hand, did not wake the man up.

After a few minutes, Anthony had stood, wished his father a good morning, and brushed it all aside, leaving to dress and prepare for the day. By the time he had met his mother, he had nearly forgotten all about that moment with his father—even then, it was easy to tease her to see if he could distract her from Ella and allow her to reveal the truth of his father.

The truth that his father would not last the month.

Anthony stepped backward in Ella's orchard against one of the trunks and sank slowly to the ground, his knees giving way as he hit the dirt.

Urgh! He whipped the branch against the side of the tree and tossed it out into the orchard.

What did it matter if the king were dying? Let us celebrate by throwing a ball for the whole kingdom to dance and be merry!

Why?

Why must they live this farce?

Why could not things be real—forces met and faced and challenged? He folded his arms and placed his head upon them. He loved his

parents. Their life, wit, charm, laughter—but he needed more sometimes.

Sometimes he needed true strength as well.

Chapter Thirteen

AFTER ELLA HAD GRABBED some bread and cold meat, making a quick lunch of it, she collected a few of the pastries she had helped create that morning and brought them down to the orchard to share with John. It took a moment to locate him; he was tucked among the back trees, sitting upon the ground.

As she approached, she saw he was in a moment of deep reflection. She halted.

Should she turn back? Should she announce her presence? Hesitant about what to do, she stood there for some time in the middle of the orchard before she concluded through his actions and downhearted posture

that perhaps he did need someone to speak to. Quietly, she walked through the grass and dirt to sit down beside him, placing the pastries and the napkin they were folded in next to the tree. "Hello," she said when he looked up.

John did not say a word. His green-brown eyes traced her features as one corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile.

She could see great worry deep within him. Nudging her arm against his, she asked, "What is wrong?"

He continued to stare at her, those long lashes hooding his eyes for a moment, and then opening to reveal great pain as well as worry.

"John, what is it?" she asked, her heart lurching. "Whatever has happened, share it with me so that I may carry some of your burden. It is not fair to shoulder it all on your own."

He suddenly leaned over and kissed her softly on the mouth.

Ella gasped, her mouth moving forward, clinging to his. She could feel his hand come up and hold her shoulder, his other arm going around her back to bring her in closer to him.

Her skin exploded in a warmth of delicious sparkles. Never had she felt such an onslaught of emotions and life and brightness as they bounced and flickered upon her. This was heaven. This was where she always wanted to be.

She pulled away first. Her lungs needed precious air, but found it hard to cope with the quivering gasps her mouth was taking. She looked at him, her eyes soaking in every emotion he bared for her to see. He, too, was having a hard time breathing.

But it was she who spoke first. "Forgive me."

John shook his head. "Do—do not apologize. Something that beautiful should be celebrated, not pitied or forgiven."

"May I ask why you kissed me?" she asked, her eyes begging his lips to do so again.

"I do not know. I only knew that if I did not right then, I might have lost the gumption."

A surprised chuckle burst right out of her. "Indeed?"

"Yes." He smiled, his arm still resting around her waist.

"So *now* will you tell me what is wrong?"

He pulled her in close, turning her back to nestle against his chest. She heard a long exhale of breath and felt the strands of hair near her ear move. "I do not know what to tell you. Where to start. Even if I could share, I would not know how."

"And you said that *I* did not trust people." She grinned and snuggled in a bit closer, loving the sound of his voice vibrating through his chest into her back.

"Touché." He took another breath and then answered, "It is not that I do not trust—it is simply that I have never been taught to share. I do not know how. I only know how to hide my fears and help others."

She found his hand near her waist and clasped it in both of hers. "Why do you not start at the beginning?"

"The beginning?"

"Or the most pressing. What is it you wish to share more than anything, but do not know how to express as you wish?"

"What do I say?"

"Exactly what is on your mind."

"My father is dying," he burst out.

Her whole body froze a moment before

she whispered, "I know what that is like. Go on. Tell me more."

John tightened his hold around her as his chin came to rest on the top of her head. "I love my father so much, as much as I love my mother. But neither of them will admit that he is dying—not even to themselves."

She almost asked if perhaps that was a good thing, if it was better that they did not focus on the negative situation, but then stopped herself.

"They tell me he is fine, but I know otherwise. I see that he is fading fast. Oh, Ella," he whispered as he placed a kiss on her hair, "I know he will die in just a few weeks, if not days."

"No."

"Yes." He wrapped his other arm around her as well. "He is already gone. He cannot move from his sickbed, and this morning I was with him for several minutes and he did not wake up. Not once. Even when I held his hand."

"Oh, John. I am so sorry."

"I worry about so many things. I worry about how to take care of my mother, and how

to meet his responsibilities when he has gone without him there guiding me and helping me through it. I worry that I will never be able to get over my grief of his passing, or how I will cope without our walks and hours of talks and laughter. I worry I will not be half the man he was, and that many will blame *him* for that."

"Do not be so hard on yourself."

He whispered, "But mostly—mostly I worry that I will never forgive him for letting his pride kill him. For not coming forth and asking for help, for not saving himself when he had the chance, and for leaving me and my mother to pick up the pieces after he has gone."

Ella sat with him upon the ground for some time. She rocked very slowly back and forth, back and forth within his arms. He followed her lead quick enough and they were soon swaying together, allowing the moment and their hearts to heal what the other could not.

When he stilled enough to calm his troubled mind, she turned around within his arms and knelt. Coming face-to-face with those glorious hazel eyes, she reached up and

placed her hand upon his shoulder. With her other hand, she brushed aside the light brown locks of hair that had become mussed from his fingers running through it. When her eyes met his again, she said "Thank you. Thank you for sharing with me." She then leaned down and kissed his nose. "You are more wonderful than you believe you are."

Confusion flitted across his features.

"You do not believe me?" She grinned slightly and then said, "Here, I shall show you what I think of you. Would you like that?"

"You want to tell me how you feel about me?"

She thought about it and then smiled a genuine smile. "Yes. Something similar. It is more how I *see* you." She leaned closer and set her arms upon his shoulders, her mouth just mere inches from him. Then she kissed his brow and said, "This brow of yours protects a kind and curious mind, a mind that cares for and thinks of so many other people. This is a mind that sorts out the trials of others and finds ways to make their lives easier. It is a selfless mind."

She pulled his head up a bit and kissed his

nose. "This perfect nose leads you where you want to go. It offers you direction and safety. It is a nose of a leader—not of one who is self-possessed, but of one hoping to direct himself well and be all he can be."

She skimmed her lips over to first one cheek and then the other. "These cheeks—oh, how I love these cheeks. They hold within them a captivating smile. An easy and cheerful grin—one that forgives others and happily lives in this world, learning how to cope with all of the muck he has been given. These cheeks are what allow you to press on, allow your humor to shine through."

She then kissed each of his eyes. "These eyes see so much more than anyone does. They see past the pretense and shadowed life someone is hiding behind to the truth and the heart of the matter. They know and understand so much more because they see so very much more. These eyes even saw me when no one else did. How I love your eyes."

She turned his face first to one side, where she kissed his ear, and then to the other. Once she kissed him, she whispered, "Your beautiful ears hear the words no one dares to

speak. They listen for a heartbeat that needs lifting, a life that needs saving, and an outlook that needs revisiting so that they may feel the rays of sunshine upon them once again. Your marvelous ears hear all that cannot be told."

Pulling back, she then tilted his head up and kissed his jaw. "This jaw is stubborn, it is strong, and it belongs to a man who will do right at any cost and will not stop until a wrong is corrected. It is loyal, it is good, it is proud, but, oh, so very worthy. How I love your firm jaw. It is exactly what every man should have—what every man should be."

She took a deep breath and faced him again, her gaze meeting his before traveling down to his grinning lips. She kissed him there, a soft, full kiss and said quietly, "These lips—these lips hold the answers to your beautiful soul. They create a world full of beauty. They rejoice, they play, they care, they love. Your lips are flawless, and quite possibly have locked within them the most joyous kisses a girl could know. I am forever in gratitude for those lips, for the simple words you speak, for they very clearly leave me breathless."

She drew back and blushed. "Now do you see? Now do you understand how it is I see you?"

Chapter Fourteen

JOHN COULD NOT STOP grinning like a fool. Who was this woman? How was he fortunate enough to have such a being in his life? His heart and mind raced as he tried to process all that she had said to him. Words he never would have used to describe himself, but said with such sincerity, such sweetness—he was quite simply moved.

How was it that no one had seen her before? How was she living here in this home and had not swept off her feet by another lucky man?

"Someday you are going to make a man very fortunate to find you."

"Me?" She laughed. "No, no, I am sure it will be quite the opposite. I am much too strong and hasty in the things I say at times. I would like to get married one day, perhaps. I would like it very much." She shrugged and pulled away from him, sitting back. "But I am so far from a proper lady, I am sometimes afraid to wonder who would ever want me."

He grinned, positive a man would sweep her up very soon. Mayhap even someone she met at the ball. "Oh, do not worry. I am sure you would be loved by anyone who spent time with you."

She glanced up, her eyes meeting his, searching his features before biting her lip and looking away. He could see the beginnings of an even redder complexion showing itself. "I hope—I hope I was not too forward just now. I would not want to make you uncomfortable." She turned back toward him. "And please do not think that what I said to you just now will complicate things between us. I know you see me as a close friend. I am well aware and fine with how things are."

John had no notion of what she meant. "But you did say some of the most wondrous

things. A man would call himself fortunate indeed to hear from your lips again."

"Yes, but I know—I know that the custom of kissing one another could be construed as a proposal of sorts, but I would like to clarify that to be sure, I do not take it that way. So you have no need to worry."

She was correct! How could he have been so foolish? To kiss a woman did allow for certain liberated thinking to take place within her mind. It would naturally unearth a whole slew of complications if the impulsive man had not thought clearly through them all. He stared at her a moment, his mind racing through the unjustness of his impulse. He had meant to thank her for her kindness, for her gentle prodding into his life, her caring nature. And then she shared with him her vision of his character, how every man wished he could be seen by a woman. His heart began to thump wildly. He would need to travel home first to sort through his feelings before he began to ascertain them all. But this—this was not right. He could not, absolutely could not fall in love with the girl and she with him while she believed him to be John.

No, he would not do that to her. She must fully comprehend what she would be getting herself into, must realize who she was speaking with and falling in love with, before he dared to return any sentiments or make any undeniable declarations. "Forgive me; I do not make it a habit to kiss women, in case I may have given you that impression as well. And you are strikingly remarkable. I have never met a girl like you before—there is something so fresh and natural, as I implied earlier, but 'tis true. You are so very easy to be with and speak to. And I—"

She came forward and placed a finger over his mouth. "John, stop. It is well. I understand you do not feel toward me what may have come across just now. This is fine. Let us be friends and enjoy the day." She smiled an engaging smile as she removed her dainty finger.

For no reason at all, he wanted to snatch her up and hold her close and kiss her like he had never dreamed of kissing another before. He was not sure he would ever let her go this time if he acted on his silly whim, and so he said simply, "One day, I will explain more

of how I truly feel—I am not sure at this moment that even I know what is happening between us—but that day is not now. There is more that needs to be revealed and more trust shown on both our parts first. However, today has indeed been a magnificent beginning to something I could not have thought possible a week ago." He found her hands and brought them up to kiss each and every one of her knuckles. "You, fair lady, do more good for a man's soul than any woman I have ever met before. I thank you. I thank you for sharing yourself and your unbelievable patience with me."

She raised an eyebrow, still smiling, her sparkling eyes sending joy right through him. "I do not know how much longer you shall see such patience if you will not stand up quickly and begin dancing with me."

"Oh-ho!" John laughed as he got to his feet, pulling her up with him. "Now I see, the reluctant lady has found her footing after all! Just yesterday you were terrified to try such things, and now you are ordering me to do it all over again."

"Yes, well, I have learned something."

"And that is?"

"As long as you have an agreeable dancing partner, the world shines brighter and your day is more complete."

"So are you saying you are now officially addicted to dancing?"

"I am saying I have found an agreeable partner, and once within his hold I tend to forget all but the happiest of things—and that, yes, that may become quite an addiction if I am not careful."

"Milady," he said as he bowed before her, "I am at your service. You can become addicted to my charms any time you would like."

"Oh, heaven help us! Do not encourage me!"

"Yes, for what would we do if all you ever wanted was to be folded about in my arms, gliding around the orchard? Something so shocking as that sounds like—"

"It sounds like bliss." She giggled and stepped into his willing embrace. "Now when do we begin?"

He grinned down into that shining face below him. A great warmth grew inside and

multiplied a hundredfold until he could feel the stimulating effects through the tips of every strand of his hair and all the way to his toes. She was in a very fair way of capturing his heart—that was, if she had not already managed to do so.

It would seem the lovely Eleanoria Woodston could charm the moon out of the sky. Wrapping his arm more firmly about her trim waist, he squeezed her right hand and said, "Would now be soon enough for you, my dear?"

"I thought we would never begin."

"Patience," he whispered as they began to glide across the grass. "Patience, and the world will soon be yours."

"But I do not need the world," she whispered in reply.

"I know, but you will have it nonetheless. Now shh… and enjoy the moment."

She giggled softly. "Brute."

"Minx."

"Monster."

"Love."

She gasped and looked up at him with such an adorable expression, he could not help

himself—he kissed her.

This time, slowly, while the world spun with them.

Chapter Fifteen

WHEN ELLA HURRIED BACK into the house with the promise to meet John the next day, she nearly flew up the stairs to her room. Oh, what a wonderful day it had been! What a glorious, perfect day. She giggled to herself and then opened her bedroom door to meet a very sullen Jillian sitting upon her bed.

"Where have you been?" Jillian asked, her face twisting into a sneer.

"I was outside in the orchard."

"For over an hour?"

It had been nearly two hours before John finally left. "There are many chores to do outside."

Jillian grumbled and folded her arms.

"Did you need something? I am sorry—I did not know you were waiting for me, or I would have come in earlier."

"Of course I was waiting for you," Jillian snarled. "Mother says I have to give you one of my gowns for the ball. She says you were invited by the queen. I did not believe her, so I came up here to read the invitation myself."

It was the first time Ella noticed the torn and crumpled missive in Jillian's hand. "You ruined my invitation?"

"I have been holding it this whole time. Had you come up here, then perhaps it would not have been so wrinkled." She held it out. "Where did you get it?"

Ella took the tattered paper and placed it on her dresser. "From the queen."

"Clearly from the queen. But how did you come by it? Tell me now."

She sighed. "I do not know why I was invited. I just know that a servant of the castle came and brought it to me. That is all."

"But how did you get invited? *You,* of all people? If anyone in this family should have been specially invited, it should have been

Lacey. She is the eldest. Not *you*."

Ella decided it was best just to agree with Jillian. "Yes, I realize that."

"And to think that now we must show up with you—and share our gowns with you! It is disgraceful."

"Yes, it is."

"When I think of the way you treat us, it is the last thing in the world I would want to do for you. Do you understand me? The last thing—helping you go to some ball as a guest of the queen!"

Ella let out a quiet sigh and walked to the window. "You received the same invitation. I am sure I will be shown the same treatment as everyone else."

"No. Clearly not. She sent a separate invitation just for you. It must mean something, and I want to know what. I want to know why *you* must be included, you who no one has heard of or seen in ages."

Ella closed the curtains and turned around, trying desperately to change the subject. "Would you rather not lend me a dress, then?"

"I do not have a choice," Jillian hissed as she got off the bed. "We might as well get this

misery over with now." She threw open the door and began to flounce down the stairs.

Closing the door silently behind her, Ella followed Jillian down the steps and into the main family rooms.

Jillian paused at her door. "Well, are you coming in, or do you choose to have me throw a dress at you?"

Throw it at me, by all means. Ella took a deep breath and walked in. Her stepsister was already at the closet, rummaging through the gowns and muttering to herself. She pulled out two and tossed them in a heap upon the bed.

"Here. Make your choice and be quick about it. You will need to help with supper soon."

Ella knew both of the dresses well. The first had looked hideous when it was still on the fabric bolt and Jillian had picked the silk out. She had decided chartreuse was all the rage a couple of seasons ago, yet no one else opted to join her in her choice of color. It was rarely worn and was still in perfect condition. However, the color would not do Ella justice at all—bright green simply did nothing for

her. That left the stained blue, but the blue was certainly much finer than the cotton one she had on at the moment.

She pulled the pretty blue gown off the bed and walked over to the looking glass. How many times had she ironed this dress and wished she could wear it. The stain was not large; however, it was of red wine and so quite noticeable. Ella swayed slightly in front of the mirror, allowing the skirts to swish back and forth. How beautiful it was. How prettily it shimmered as the light danced upon it.

Pulling the stained portion of the skirt up to inspect it better, Ella found her solution. Quickly, she flipped the dress around and walked over to the bed, laying it down. Its skirts formed a large arch. She tucked the stained portion in with her fingers and then, doing the same with another bit of the skirt a few inches to the left, she saw that it bunched up nicely in an attractive pattern. If she repeated the same folds every few inches, it would look like a whole new gown.

"So have you decided yet?" Jillian's shrill voice caused her to jump.

"Yes, I have."

"Good." She shooed Ella away with her hand. "Then leave, please, and take the gown with you."

Ella quickly gathered up the dress and walked to the door. "Thank you," she said as she stepped into the corridor. "It will look very lovel—"

Jillian slammed the door shut.

"Lovely," Ella whispered to no one in particular as she turned to head back up to her rooms.

"Ella, is it true?" Lacey quietly asked and motioned her into her room.

"Is what true?" Ella asked as she walked in.

"Did you truly get invited to the ball by the queen herself?"

"Yes."

Lacey squealed. "How wonderful!"

Ella was surprised to be wrapped in an enthusiastic hug.

"It is the best news I have heard all day."

"You are happy, then?" Ella asked, amazed.

"Of course I am!" Lacey giggled and let her go. "Now you can be there with me

and make sure I will not act the fool in front of Lord Gavenston. I know you will be the perfect good luck charm."

"Me? You think I bring good luck?"

"Well, you got yourself invited to the ball, did you not?"

Ella laughed and shook her head. "I am not quite so certain the ball will be something lucky—especially with the upheaval it is causing the family at the moment."

"Pshaw!" Lacey waved her hand and sat down upon the white chair near her large window. "My mother and sister need to rethink their priorities. All along it has been upholding the Dashlund name and how they feared your boorish ways would ruin that name. Well, I say good for you! Well done to get invited. It is about time they saw how well you really will do at an event at the palace. Heaven knows you will do better than I."

Lacey was not aware of it, but her words wounded Ella. So that was why they had banished her—they were ashamed of her. Ella's face reddened as her whole body went cold. How does one rectify that? How does one prove they can indeed be around royalty

without shaming them all? "Thank you for your confidence in me, though I fear it may be misplaced."

"You will do fine, I promise you." Lacey glanced at the gown in Ella's arms. "Is that the one you have chosen, then? It is very pretty and will look remarkable on you."

Ella nodded. "Thank you. I will have to alter it a bit to hide the stain, but I think it will come out very fine."

Lacey stood up from her chair. "You will outshine us all, you know."

"I will?" Ella laughed. "No, no, you are all ten times more beautiful than I. And you hold yourself with the proper grace and etiquette needed for these types of galas. Whereas I, on the—"

Lacey started to laugh. Loudly. "Oh, Ella, you really have never seen what I can do, have you? Yes, around here I am feminine and good. But out there—or more especially, as soon as Lord Gavenston shows up—I am all arms and legs and elbows. Anything that could go wrong surely does! And it is so mortifying. Frankly, I am surprised I was even included on the invite list at all, considering

what happened last time."

Perhaps it was a good thing Ella was coming. Mayhap she would be able to keep Jillian away and allow Lacey to have a moment with the duke without wreaking havoc on them both. "I have had to clean up your messes after such incidents, and it does amaze us all the amount of damage that can occur. But you are correct—I have never witnessed these moments firsthand." Ella walked over to the bed and settled herself against it. Lacey was quick to follow suit. "What happened the last time you visited the castle?" Ella asked.

Lacey closed her eyes and ran her hand over her face. "It was awful—just completely awful."

"What happened?"

Chapter Sixteen

LACEY OPENED HER EYES and stared ruefully at Ella. Shaking her head slightly, she began, "I do not know exactly. I really cannot say. But Jillian and I were speaking with the duke one moment and then the next, I tripped over something and flew into his arms, knocking not only him to the ground, but rows upon rows of newly placed latticework for the recently planted hedges. They all tumbled down around us in a great circle, one right after another. The last one landed directly on the queen's footman, causing him to tumble upon her. She fell onto the large table spread full of food."

"No." Ella winced. "The poor queen."

"Oh, it was worse, so very much worse. For when the table crashed, food starting flying about and landing upon all those who had rushed to hold the latticework up. In those drawn-out seconds, it became such a sticky mess. Gowns ruined, wigs falling off, men and women alike slipping all over the place. The servants themselves had several more falls and slips and I just lay there, on top of Lord Gavenston, afraid to move. Afraid to see what else could happen to us all."

"Was he fine with allowing you to remain on him?"

"Oh, he did not know!" Lacey chuckled a bit. "Did I not tell you the worst part?" When Ella shook her head, she continued, "The whole occasion, I had been convinced he was acting the gentleman by allowing me to stay upon him—no. Indeed, I did not know it at the time, but he had been stunned in the fall—the wind completely knocked out of him. It was not until I looked at his strangely gray-blue face that I discovered I was not allowing the air to come back in his lungs. As quickly as possible, I scrambled off him and turned

him over. After a few sharp whacks on the back by a man next to us, he began to cough, and all was well again. But, no, Ella, no, in my inane attempt to keep my balance, I nearly killed the man I love."

"My goodness."

"Yes. I promise you, there is nothing you can do at the ball that will top my elegance. Nothing."

"I am so sorry. No wonder no one spoke of it."

She laughed. "Yes, well, now you can see why I am in a bit of disgrace with Mother, as well as with the royal family."

"Surely they would not be so harsh. They invited you, did they not?"

Lacey raised one brow and said, "I would not even think to show my face—I would not even step upon the palace grounds—except I cannot help myself. I must see the duke again, if only to watch him run from me."

"Oh, Lacey."

"I know." She sighed. "It is a very sad muddle I have found myself in. I really do not know what will become of me now that I have kissed him, though. The poor, dear man. He

must dread the thought of coming near me, positive I will come flying at him and crash him to the ground."

A shocked giggled escaped Ella's lips. "I am so sorry!" she exclaimed just before another giggle burst out.

Lacey looked at her and then grinned. "No, no, go on. At least someone may find some humor in my idiocy."

"You are not an idiot."

Lacey laughed. "I am sure the duke would beg to differ."

"Please promise me that if you plan on flying through the air and landing on top of him again, you will let me be there to observe."

"You are awful!"

"I know. You do realize how truly wicked I am." Ella chuckled more.

Lacey smiled and shook her head. "No, Ella. You are the least wicked of anyone I know."

Ella's grin slipped. "Thank you."

"I mean every word of it. You do so much for us and help us and do all the things the maids are paid to do, and yet you do not

receive an allowance. You do not even receive a proper room. And all of this you do—and you do not overly complain."

"'Tis not like I have much of a choice."

"You must die inside at times, to know that it is your own house and you cannot even truly live in it."

Could she be saying what she thought she was? "Lacey?"

"As you can see, I have thought about it a lot. And it is hard for me to bear sometimes—I do not know how you live this way."

Ella shrugged. "It is the only life I know."

"But it is not fair!"

Not knowing what to say, Ella looked out the window.

"Why do you think I am so set upon marrying the duke?"

Ella glanced back over. "Surely not because of me."

Lacey leaned over and grasped her hand. "If I can marry someone with rank and wealth, I can surely right your wrongs, give you back your house. If I live with the duke, Mother and Jillian would not wish to stay here, and

you can have it all back."

"Lacey, I do not think it works that way. This is your mother's house."

She shook her head and grinned. "No, it is not. It is yours. It was written clearly upon the will that the house and all its possessions belong to you."

"I beg your pardon." Ella felt as if her very breath left her. "I do not believe I heard you correctly. What did you say?"

"Listen," Lacey whispered, her gaze boring into Ella. "Everything my mother has told you is false. It is not hers. It never was. She is stealing from you. She is actually at your mercy—and she is terrified the queen will reveal that to you at the ball. I have never known my mother to be so ill. But, Ella, I figure it is time you knew the truth from one of us. It is yours. Even the horse Mother took from you—it was always yours."

Great, cruel tears began to form in Ella's eyes. "No, I cannot believe it. I cannot believe you have all been this brutal."

Lacey nodded, tears coming into her own eyes. "Believe it. Mother was so frightened when Lord Dashlund died. She had no home,

her income spent—we had nothing. And so she took us together and counseled and came up with this plan to save us. She told us how wicked you were—and how you would turn us out onto the streets the first moment you got."

Ella gasped.

"But it is not you. I have watched you. Again and again, I have watched you, Ella. You are not the wicked one. You would have never done that to us. Oh, how we should have been kinder to you—how we should have loved you as we could have. But we did not. And now Mother fears all will be lost."

Ella clasped Lacey's hands tight within her own and whispered, "Speak nothing of this to anyone. I will not toss you out. I must think. But, please, do not let them know what you have said to me. I was not invited to the ball for that purpose. There was no reason to tell me—but still, I will think on this. I promise you will all be well."

With that, Ella left Lacey—the blue gown in her arms floating behind her as she rushed up the stairs to her attic room and collapsed upon the bed. She curled her knees to her chest, her fingers going to the cracks upon

the wall. She traced them until she could no longer see them through her blurry eyes.

And then she wept.

And wept.

And wept.

All of it. Every last bit had been a lie.

Chapter Seventeen

ANTHONY RUSHED TO GET to the Dashlund orchard by two o'clock, but he simply could not leave the palace until nearly three. His father had a very uneasy night. He had deteriorated enough that his mother gave in to Anthony's pleadings and called for the court physician. When the doctor arrived, it was nearly four in the morning and all of them were haggard and relieved to see him. Even his father did not complain when the man began to poke and prod.

Anthony hovered near the bed while his father was examined until his mother commanded him to leave. "Anthony Jonathan,

I cannot endure your pacing another moment. You are fidgeting around like an old maid. Go find something to do so my nerves can be calmed during this." She clasped his father's frail, limp hand as if her life depended upon nothing more than his touch.

"And what shall I do? There is nowhere to go this early in the morn. And I certainly will not be able to rest until I know my father's outcome."

She groaned. "Anthony, please do not argue with me at the moment. Be gone with you. Perhaps collect a book from the library to read to your father later—but do something, my son. I have not been this agitated in years."

He sneered. "Perhaps you feel this way because you are finally admitting to yourself that your husband is dying."

"Anthony, enough!"

Her gaze pierced his soul—the hurt and fear coursing through her seemed to shoot directly to his heart. He had not known until that moment how much his mother's strength actually sustained him, how much her denial did indeed give him more hope than he could

have known otherwise. "You have always known?" he asked in a whisper. "This whole time, you have known Father was dying and yet you pretended as if you did not see it?"

"Of course I knew," she whispered. "He is the love of my life—my rock. I have known for some time he is failing." She waved her hand at him. "I will be able to speak with you later—just go. Please."

He watched his mother warily for a time before nodding his head and saying, "I will be in the library if you need me. Please have someone bring news as soon as you can."

"We will." His mother smiled bravely as he shut the door behind him.

Anthony made his way to the darkened library and collapsed upon the large settee. He settled his slippers atop the arm of the sofa, knowing full well his mother would scold him if she could see his manners now. He grinned slightly and glanced down at the cold fireplace. The room had a distinct damp chill to it, but he could not be bothered to ring for a servant to start the fire. Instead, his eyes found the bright moon, shining down upon him through the split of the curtain at the window.

He blinked up at her, taking in the large, bright globe that she was. "You are so beautiful tonight," he mumbled aloud. "You watch over and protect us all, do you not? How many a sleepless night have you comforted for others such as myself? How many wishes have you captured within your moonbeams?" He chuckled at his own foolishness and then felt the beginning of a sob suddenly launch within his throat. "May I make a wish upon you now? Will you capture it and hold it close for me?"

Two great tears welled within his eyes and he quickly dashed them away. Then, finding solace in covering his face, Anthony sat up and buried his head within his hands. He had so very many wishes to send up to the moon—so very many impractical ones—and they all raced through his mind like a cacophony of jumbles and nuisances. After a moment, he cleared his thoughts enough to allow one to stand out singular from all the rest. The wish kept repeating itself over and over within him until he finally uttered the words, "I wish—I wish." He broke as an onslaught of grief overwhelmed him, great sobs racking his

whole body.

He knew then that he could not stop the inevitable.

It was time to let go.

But how? How was he to cope without the best man in the world?

How was he to stand and become all he was destined to be without his great king by his side?

Life was not fair. Life was not free from trials or filth or anything awful.

The trials of living would always be there, taunting him and forcing him to give up. To collapse under the pressures of an eternal existence of gloom.

He could not live without his father.

He *had* to live without him.

Huge sobs broke free—so thankful was he to be all alone in this darkened room, to have this moment to let his dear father go.

And when he was done sobbing, when he could catch his breath enough to speak, he simply said, "Moon, I wish for the strength to carry on. Let me find it, please. And find it soon."

His Royal Highness Prince Anthony

Jonathan Algernon fell to the floor upon his knees, bowed his head into his arms and the cushions of the sofa, and began the Prayer of Watchfulness, the prayer his kingdom had used for centuries to tell their god that they were finally willing to submit to His watchful eye.

To allow Him to provide or release where He saw fit.

Anthony sobbed until his heart broke, and then continued on until stitch by warm stitch he was finally able to breathe, until he was sure his heart was sewn back up enough again to beat upon its own.

And then the handsome prince fell asleep. Sitting crumpled upon the floor, his head buried in his arms, resting upon the seat of his father's favorite sofa.

Chapter Eighteen

BY THE TIME ANTHONY was nudged awake by the physician, his father had passed on. He did not quite understand all the words the doctor said, but the distraught features of his mother told him everything he needed to know. Standing somewhat stiffly, he walked up to her and held his arms out wide. She clutched him, and he let her weep and mumble incoherent mutterings into his shoulder. She had been up all night. It was nearly ten, and she had fought and prayed valiantly for her husband to stay with them, but he did not.

He had passed sometime within the last few minutes. She was not in the room when

he went. She left to fetch a shawl for him—just walked into his dressing room for a few seconds. When she returned, he was gone.

And she was gone as well.

The strong, courageous mother he knew was now a shattered shell of who she once was. Both his parents—both of the rocks he could lean upon—were gone now. It was he; he was the rock.

He was the rock the kingdom would turn to for help.

It was nearly three before he was finally able to tuck his mother into bed and make his way into the bright sunshine to Ella.

How he needed her at this moment.

How he needed any distraction at all.

They had decided not to announce his father's death for another few more hours at least to give the queen time to regain some composure and her strength. Hopefully it would be enough to face the masses again.

He rode his horse swiftly to the orchard, allowing the breeze and gloriousness of the day to pacify his loss. Sliding down from the animal, he looped its reins upon the closest branch and looked for the girl who was not

there.

Heaving a disappointed sigh, he sat down upon the ground and rested his back against the tree. No doubt she had already waited for him as long as she dared and then headed back in the house. He thought about coming up to the door, but decided it was not worth the complications that might arise from such actions. He could not risk being seen by her family.

Instead, he folded his arms and sighed again—surprised at how truly saddened he was that she was not there. He needed a distraction to take his mind off his aching heart. Something to allow hope back in—something he could do himself to repair… He needed something. Yet, he did not know what.

"Forgive me for coming so late."

Anthony turned around and smiled as Ella approached.

"I am glad you did not give up on me and head home," she said as she sat next to him.

"Hello." He was about to explain that he had barely arrived himself when his gaze traced her worn features. Her eyes were swollen, perhaps as much as his.

"Hello." She grinned lopsidedly.

He tenderly brought his hand up to brush away the wisps of hair that had escaped her bun. "What is wrong, Ella?"

She turned her head and brushed her lips against his palm, kissing it. "Why would you say something is wrong?"

He let out a short chuckle. "Are we to play this game, then?"

Her gaze met his. "John! What has happened? You look quite fatigued."

Closing his eyes, he slid his hand around her head to cup her neck. When he opened his eyes, he replied, "I am fatigued. I feel as though I have lived several lifetimes the past twelve hours."

"What happened?"

Kissing her brow, he said, "You first."

She shook her head. "I cannot tell you."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot." She pulled back. "What ails you?"

"Ella, if someone caused those tears, I would kindly like to know who did so that I may throttle them."

"Which is precisely why I will not tell

you."

He dropped his hand. "Are you jesting? Someone did something to you so horrid that I would throttle them if I knew what it was?"

Her trusting eyes met his. She took a couple of deep breaths, but still did not speak.

"Ella? What is it?"

She turned her head away.

His heart lurched. "Why are you ashamed? Do not turn from me now. Please, whatever it is, let us work it out together." He grasped her hands. "Please, I need this—I very much need this right now."

He watched as her gaze darted to their clasped hands and then to his eyes. "Will you promise me something?" she asked.

"Anything."

"Promise that no matter what I tell you, you will remain impassive and you will not harm those involved."

My word! What had the girl suffered? "I promise I will do everything in my power not to react badly to whatever it is you reveal."

Ella grinned. "That is not good enough."

"What? 'Tis the best I can do—promise to control myself. But really, it depends on

what you say—what secret you reveal."

"Jonathan!"

"Eleanoria!"

"You must promise."

"You would have me lie, then? If that is what it takes, then so be it. I will lie to you, though I would much rather not."

She sighed and, releasing one hand, turned slightly and rested her head upon his shoulder. After a few minutes of silence, she began to tell him.

"When my father died, he apparently left everything in his last will and testament to me—everything—except I was not told. In fact, I was told just the opposite."

She paused, and John wrapped his arm around her and nudged her in closer.

Her voice cracked as she continued, "I have been told, been reminded nearly every day since his death, that I own nothing in that house. Nothing. Not even my mother's…" She trailed off as the emotions became too much for her.

John's hand clenched next to her side—the only outward showing of rage he would allow himself. "Continue," he whispered. "Tell me

what else has happened."

"They took all my mother's possessions, all the items she had received from her dowry and ancestors that were meant for me, and divided it amongst themselves. Earlier this week, I found my grandmother's pearls with Jillian. My clothing, my bedroom, everything—they took it all. I was forced to live up in the attics, earning my keep for them so I would not become a burden. That is why they got rid of Sunshine." Her shoulders trembled as she valiantly tried to get the rest out. "They—they did not want me to believe I was better than them, so they took her from me. They have repeatedly told me the most horrible truths about myself. Things I would never want to say out loud."

Her voice barely recognizable through her sobs, she continued, "It was all done so I would believe the lie, so I would believe my father did not remember me in his will, so I would not question any of it. I would forever subject myself to their abuse and cruelties."

His mind raced, imaging what they had said and how the fiends treated her. It was a wonder she was so warm and gracious after

the treatment she had received. Though, there was one thing that puzzled him. "How did you discover the truth?"

She shook her head. "I never would have known. I would never have thought to question any of it. It was Lacey, Miss Dashlund, who revealed the whole of it last night."

"Miss Dashlund? *The* Miss Dashlund, the girl who ruined the queen's garden party?"

He could feel her smile, though he could not see it. "The very same."

"And how did she come to be your ally?"

"I do not know. A change has overcome her, this past year at least, and recently she has become even more pleasant with me. I dare say we are almost friends, if not sisters." She snorted. "I believe it may have something to do with her clumsiness and becoming more and more my stepmother's trial as each event becomes worse"

John could not imagine such a silly girl being Ella's friend and confidante, but if Lacey were truly an ally, then mayhap he would have to open up the castle to her too… His thoughts halted. Right then and there, they

halted. What was he thinking?

He was thinking of Ella being with him always.

He simply could not become king without his Ella by his side. Her wisdom, her loyalty, her happiness, her gravity, her humility—here was the answer he had been searching for, waiting for. His aching heart burst with warmth. He loved her.

Chapter Nineteen

ELLA PULLED BACK AND looked up at John. "I believe there is more to the story of Lacey's awkwardness and mishaps than has been revealed. I am afraid Jillian is behind most of it, if not all. I have not been able to understand why Jillian would do something this underhanded toward her own sister, but I am sure she…" Ella stopped and turned more fully toward him. "What? Why are you looking at me with such a grin?"

"Can a man not smile when he is in the presence of a beautiful woman?"

She blinked. "Did you hear a word of what I said a few moments ago?"

His grin deepened, showing a faint dimple near the corner of his mouth. "No, not a one."

He must not be serious. Laughing, she asked, "You honestly did not hear anything I said about Jillian?"

"No. My mind was more agreeably occupied."

Her breath caught as her eyes met his—they sparkled dangerously into her own. "May I inquire what you were thinking about?"

"You, of course."

"Me?"

"Just so."

Her insides began to move wildly about. "And what was that?"

"How much I wish I could kiss your perfect mouth right now."

She flushed and grinned, her eyelashes fluttering as she tried desperately to focus on anything but his intense gaze.

"I am quite positive you are the most adorable woman I have ever met when you are embarrassed." He released her hand and gently cradled her chin. "Can I kiss you again?" he asked once her eyes had settled more firmly upon him.

"Yes, please."

She let out a little whimper as his mouth closed upon hers. To connect with someone, someone who understood her and felt her and cared for her after all the horridness she had faced, to share such a delicate thing as one's lips was simply magical. It created so much hope and happiness and joy within her. She clung to him as he deepened the kiss, almost as if he were pouring his heart and soul into it.

Breathless, she pulled away first, inhaling with gasps. "John—John, what has happened? I feel as though a connection between us was realized. I do not know what I am saying—or what I am trying to say—but it feels—it feels…"

"As though our kiss was saying all the words we cannot at the moment?" His eyes seized her in a way no one else ever had. The intensity, the emotions, the raw feelings were all there for her to take and pluck and explore at will.

"What can you not say? Does it have anything to do with what happened the past twelve hours?" she asked.

He closed his eyes briefly before opening

them again. "It has everything to do with that—and nothing to with it at all." All of a sudden, as if a great weight had descended upon him, he hunched lower. "There is so much I need to reveal to you—so very, very much. But I worry. I wonder if now is the time, if you would still wish to be near me if you knew. If you would not run away and hide from me."

"Such intrigue! Why are you speaking in riddles? Why not come out and say what you mean?"

"Because I am afraid to lose you."

She shook her head, finding his hand again and clasping it. "I am going nowhere. I promise you this. I have shared with you my biggest, deepest secret, the one thing no one knew—it is time to trust me with yours." She leaned forward and kissed his worried mouth. "We are friends, are we not? I promise, whatever it is you reveal, I will not abandon you. I cannot. For I have shared with you all that I am—all that I know. It is yours to safeguard for eternity. John, what more could there be? If you are still here after listening to such a worthless soul as mine, then I am no

friend of yours if I do not stay and listen to your suffering heart." She smiled. "We are the same, you and I, and we will battle through this together."

John wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her once again, an urgent, passionate kiss as if he were a man afraid to lose what precious thing he held in his arms and so therefore proving to himself and the world that she still existed. When he released her, he looked more haggard and troubled than she had ever seen him before.

She whispered, "What could be so awful as to put such lines and worry upon your brow? My dearest John, please—allow me to shoulder this burden with you."

Abruptly, he climbed to his feet and began to pace in front of her, his hands shaking and going every which way—to his hips, to his hair, to his face—as if they had no idea where to settle. "Eleanoria Woodston," he began as he turned his back to her, "I do not know what to say to you. I do not know how to control the emotions of these past twenty-four hours within me. There is so much inner turmoil at the moment, I find myself completely at a

loss." He spun around and looked directly at her. "I beg of you to have patience with me—open your heart to the compassion I know is there and loan some my way, for I have much to reveal, things I have not fully come to terms with myself. And I have no one to turn to but you." He glanced out toward the nearest tree. "My soul yearns to explode and share everything with you—every last bit. And yet, my mind is terrified. I am torn on where to begin, how to speak this all properly—how best to communicate all that must be revealed without you becoming alarmed and leaving me."

She stood and walked to his side. He was so lost in his thoughts, she placed first one hand around his waist and then the other. Pressing her face against his strong chest, she held him to her, giving him the strength and calmness he needed to silence his anxiety and inward struggle and ramblings. There was not much to offer him but tranquility and peace, and so she did, in droves, waves upon soothing waves sent toward him from herself.

As her hands clung to his back, she could hear his racing heart begin to slow with each

breath.

He wrapped his arms around her and murmured, "Thank you. Thank you."

"When you are ready, you may tell me what has happened. Until then, do not worry yourself over such things. I am sorry if I pressed you. It does not matter—in the end, it does not matter at all."

He took a breath and tightened his hold. For several minutes they stood there in the garden, clasping one another and breathing, enjoying, being.

When he took another deep breath, his hands stilling from the soft circles they were creating upon her back, she knew he would begin to tell her.

"My father died this morning. He was taken quite ill last night—my mother is distraught, and I am at a loss as to what to do. I do not know how to go on without him." She gasped as he clasped her tighter, and then slowly, each word coming out in completed pauses, a breath between every one, he revealed, "My father was the king."

Chapter Twenty

ELLA'S WHOLE BODY WENT numb, and her arms slackened their hold. "I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"I am Prince Anthony. I am not John, the outrider to Lord Gavenston. I am the duke's cousin and best friend, but even he—even he did not know my father was ill. No one did."

She would have pulled away, but his arms tightened upon her. So many voices and memories flew at her at once. She could not think properly. She could not fully process what he had said. He could not be Prince Anthony. He could not be! No.

"Please do not leave me. Please do not

pull away. Allow me to hold you until the realization of all I have revealed has settled into your heart."

She snuggled closer, pulling her arms in to tuck against his chest. "Why did you not tell me?"

"I wanted you to trust me—to come to know me as a person before you were made aware of the fact I was royalty. I knew how you felt about the people of the court."

"And this is how you came by my invitation to the ball so readily?"

"I—yes. It is my connection to the queen—my mother. I just asked her to write one out and she did."

Ella took a deep breath. "Your mother is the queen?"

"Yes."

"Your father the king?"

"Yes."

"You—you, the man holding me at this moment, are Prince Anthony."

"Yes."

"But I remember you. You are John! You have always been John—the boy whose horse lost to Sunshine every year."

"The boy who would sneak out of the castle with his cousin to pretend to be a villager so he could race against the only horse worthy enough to challenge him."

"I was soundly outracing the prince this whole time."

"Yes."

She bumped her head against his chest in frustration. "Why did you not tell me? Why keep something like this under lock and key for so very long?"

"Ella," he said gently, "as a boy, I would have been whipped if anyone knew. Once I was older, you were dressed as a servant. I had no notion why Lord Dashlund's daughter would be dressed so, which is why I pretended to be John a bit longer—to solve the great mystery you have finally revealed to me."

Her hands froze and she tried to pull away again. "This was all to get me to trust you? To get me to open up to you?"

"At first, yes. I wanted to help you and I knew you would never speak to the prince the same way you spoke to John, and so I did continue with the falsehood. But, then—then…"

"And now that you know of my family's mistreatment of me? Do you mean to spread this around and speak ill of the Dashlund name? Do you mean to use your princely powers to displace us all and call out my stepmother and stepsisters?"

"No."

"What will you do now that the great mystery is solved? Will you go and solve more mysteries and pretend to be other people with other subjects and—"

He silenced her with a kiss. He would not release his hold upon her lips until he could feel her mind settling down, until he could feel her kissing him back and the sanity slowly weave itself around her heart again. This woman, this fierce, brave woman had gone years without knowing who to trust. It was no wonder her world would slip when all this came to land at her feet. She needed time to think. She needed time to ponder upon her own feelings for him.

But she needed to do so knowing that he was in love with her, knowing that he would

wait until the end of time for her to see him for the man he was and not the self-righteous prince she had always imagined he would be.

Oh, how he kissed her. How she melted and folded herself into his arms.

When he was done, he simply said, "Ella, I love you."

He could feel her tears wetting his shirt as her shoulders shook within his arms.

"Ella, we have much to discuss, much more to talk over. But I am willing to give you time—time to sort this all out and come to a conclusion about what you would like to do. My father has just died. I will be made king very shortly. My dear, my world is nothing without you. I would ask you to think of all I have spoken of today, all I have said to you and my reasons for doing so. And I would like to know—later, much later—if you are willing to be my friend still, if you are willing to continue this path with me and see where it will lead us.

"I am willing to move slowly—there is no rush. With my father's death, there is much to be sorted within the castle over the next little while. I may not be here as often as I

would like to be. I do not know when I can make it back to your arms—but know that I will be thinking of you every single second." He released her and looked into her wet eyes. "I love you. Please think of that when you decide what it is you wish to do. I understand if you would never like to see me again, but I beg of you to reconsider and decide within your heart all you do feel for me. I will not press you further at this time, but know that I will wait for as long as it takes for you to decide if you wish to be with me." She looked away.

"There is one more thing," he said. "I would like you to decide how best to handle your family. If you wish everything to remain as it is, I will allow it. If you wish to have them brought to court and humiliated, we can arrange that too. It is up to you what is done to them or not done to them. I will leave it in your hands."

She looked up then, her beautiful eyes glistening through the tears. "Thank you. I do not know what else to say, so thank you."

"I will leave you now. Please decide what you will of my outcome—it is literally in your

hands. I give it all to you—my heart, my life, my fate. And I will take this small smile you are giving me now as a sign of hope, as a sign of a brighter future than I could have imagined a week ago." He took one hand and raised it to his lips. "Be safe, my angel. I will be back for my answer soon. You will hear from me, I promise you."

Ella attempted to deepen her smile, his hazel eyes holding more seriousness than could be right for him at this moment. "John—Your Highness—"

"Anthony. I am forever *your* Anthony."

"An—Anthony, I am sorry to hear of your father. My condolences must be given before I think of anything else at this time—forgive me for not mentioning them earlier."

"Thank you."

"I know what a good man he was. And for my own part, I will miss my king terribly too." She blinked at the sudden tears that formed. "I know what you must be suffering at this time, and I am so very sorry. Is there anything—anything I can do for you or your

mother?"

"Yes." He nodded and brought her knuckles to his lips once more. "Promise me you will think over all I said—and promise me I will have a friend when this is all over."

How torn he was! How lost and heartbroken. "I will always be here for you. And I promise to give my response soon."

"Does this give me leave to imagine I still have a partner for the ball? I cannot guarantee when it will be now, if my mother will choose to carry on as before or postpone it. However, I would still love you for a partner, if you are agreeable."

His grin was too adorable. She smiled and answered, "Yes."

"Then I shall be there at half-past nine on whatever day it is held." He bowed his head quickly. "Forgive me, but I am in a mind to leave you at once, before you change yours!" He chuckled as he walked over and fetched the reins of his horse. Slipping one foot in the stirrup, he jumped smoothly atop the steed. "Good day to you, fair lady. I will speak with you soon."

With that, he was gone.

And Ella was left there in the orchard. How much difference twenty-four hours makes! She walked to the trunk of the tree and slid down it. How in the world would she ever make sense of all that had come forth?

A prince? A prince? She had captured the heart of a prince.

Ella laughed. If it was not all so ludicrous and outrageous, she might have laughed more.

She supposed it would be best to sort out her feelings and give him her answer by the ball.

Her heart jolted and the butterflies fluttered within her again. To be with the prince at the ball, in front of all those people—nay, not the prince. He would be king! Oh, great heavens, what muddle had she got herself into?

Chapter Twenty-One

AFTER SOME TIME, ELLA made her way back to the house and up to her bedroom. It was so very much to accept and believe—so very much of her life had been completely dumped upside down and shaken until everything she thought she knew was a jumbled mess upon the floor.

He loved her! Prince Anthony loved her.

And he had known it was her all along. He loved her for being, well, her. Not a silly girl of the court, but as a servant, a woman who spoke with him and talked with him. He understood her love and need for horses. He understood her fears and heart and her desire

to take her time. He understood the deep love she felt for her father. He understood her. And cared for her.

How was it possible?

There was much she must sort out before the ball. And plenty she must decide within herself, but for now—now, it was best to get back into the kitchen and see what help she could be.

Slipping off the nicer of the two pairs of boots she owned, she pulled on the older ones. No reason to work in the kitchen with her best on. As she slid on her left boot, she was reminded of the key she had hidden in there the day before.

Pulling it out, she examined the pretty brass etchings and scrolling around it. This key looked so very familiar to her. It was something she had seen many times before—but it must have been years and years ago. What lock in the house would it fit? It was certainly too fine to be used every day. This key was most definitely used on something personal and costly.

She could not think of a box that would require such a key. With a shrug, she placed it

under her pillow and made her way down the stairs, determined to solve it later—much later, when she could clear her mind of everything else and give the matter some thought.

ANTHONY MADE HIS WAY home just in time to greet his mother as she stepped out of her chambers after her nap.

"Are you sure you are up for this so soon?" he asked as he leaned over and gave the queen a kiss on the cheek. "You are welcome to sleep longer—perhaps even face the announcement tomorrow morning, if you would like."

Her worn eyes searched his a moment as she grinned slightly. "And where have you been, my son? Did you rush to visit your Eleanoria, then?"

"I knew you would figure it out soon enough."

"Ah." She gave out a short, soft chuckle. "Even when consumed with grief, it is amazing what an overactive mind can plague you with as you are attempting to rest."

"You have just now sorted it out?"

"I could not sleep. I lay there the whole time sickened and frenzied by all that must be done in the next few days—and trying to sort out the rest of our lives." She reached up and patted him on the cheek. "I thought of you as king, and wondered how you will be able to face it all." Walking slowly to the nearest chair lining the grand corridor, she sat down. "I was so fearful of all you will have to take on—and so worried for you."

"Mother." He crouched down beside her. "You should not worry yourself over these things. I will be fine."

"And then I remembered her—the mystery girl you were off to see. And I remembered the invitation you had me address to Eleanoria Woodston, Lord Dashlund's daughter." She smiled, her eyes caressing his features. "You have found her. I had nearly forgotten he had a daughter until now. Is she well?"

"Yes, I have stumbled upon her. She is well." He did not feel at liberty to reveal the whole of her situation to his mother just yet.

"I can see by your smile that she is very pretty, too."

Anthony rolled his eyes as his grin

deepened.

"And she has captured your heart," she whispered. "Good girl."

"Yes. She has caught it up tight."

"Is she in love with you as well?"

"I think so. I hope so. But she does not know it yet."

His mother nodded. "Good. It is good that she learns to love you slowly—you royal men fall in love too quickly, in my opinion."

"But Father—"

"Was a fool to fall in love with me." She grinned. "I could have turned out to be anyone at all, and yet, his soul was attached."

Anthony stood up. "When did you find you were in love with him?"

"Oh, goodness. I am sure it was a good two or three days after he did." She laughed. "We were fools. We always have been." She held out her hand and took a deep breath. "Help me up, my dear. I must face this and I am afraid I cannot do so alone. I miss him so very much."

"I will be with you, Mother. I will be by your side, holding your arm the whole time."

She took another deep breath as she

clutched his hand and allowed him to pull her up. "I will even forgive you for smelling of horse."

Surprised, Anthony burst into laughter.

"Yes, my son, we will be fine. It may take us a bit, but we will be fine."

IT WAS A FEW days after the funeral for the king and about a week before the prince's coronation that Ella found herself wandering the orchard, wishing he would come. The day of the funeral had been hard—the villages and several surrounding kingdoms had all come to pay their respects and many had left with swollen eyes and heavy hearts. Anthony had given an inspiring speech, showing to the world the great love he had for his father and the kind ruler he had been. It was certainly difficult for Ella to sit through, as it brought on so many memories of her own good father. But to see Anthony up there, in all his princely glory, looking so foreign and strong and competent—it was peculiar.

It hurt, too, that she was not able to catch his eye. And when the reverend got up to

speak, she saw Anthony break down in tears and it took every ounce of control she had not to rush all the way up to the podium and wrap her arms around him.

More than likely it was in that moment when she understood her true feelings for him. Knowing he was suffering and she could do nothing about it was torturous. Instead, she held her feelings deep within herself and wept for him when she got home.

Now she wandered the orchard as she had done every day, waiting for him. Hoping he would come. She sighed and looked around at the trees. They would soon be losing their blossoms as the tiny buds of the apples began to appear. But now, it was a wondrous fairyland of soft, pink petals.

She missed him. How she missed him. How she wished she could laugh and tease and play with him. Yet things had changed. She kicked at a pebble beneath her foot. The queen had even postponed the ball for another two months.

Two months! What in the world would Ella do for such a long time—especially if Anthony was never able to get away to see

her? She sighed again. It was pointless to wait out here. It was simply pointless to wish and dream for a man who was too busy preparing to take over the kingdom to remember she was here and waiting for him.

As she came past the stables on her way up to the house, she was surprised to see Hansen beckoning her.

"Are you well?" she asked, hoping his rheumatism was not acting up again.

"Yes, Miss." He grinned, his wrinkles wreathing his face around the large smile.

She could not help herself—she grinned with him. "What is it?"

"I have something to show you, Miss. Something I have had hidden a mighty long time and have only just now come across it again while I was cleaning out the storeroom."

Curious, she followed him inside the stables. "What is it?"

"'Tis something you need to see—I would be showing that prince of yours as well, as it is important."

"My prince?" She halted. "Hansen, how do you know who he is?"

"My goodness, child! You do not go

around entertaining young men out in the orchard without me checking up on him, do you, now?"

She gasped out a chuckle. "Did you spy on us?"

"You bet your boots I did! If I needed to come out with my shovel and whack the boy, I would have done it, too. Took me a minute to place him, but once I did, I saw very much that he was indeed the young prince."

"Have you told anyone else?" They began to walk to the back of the stables again, this time toward the storehouse inside.

"No. Your business is your business—unless I need to make it my business, and then I will. But he was not hurting you at all and I liked the idea of you having such a sweet beau, so I left well enough alone." He stopped at an old door and turned to her. "However, what is in here is something you should see. Something I promised your father never to show you until it was time. And I figure with the king dying and your prince going to be on the throne soon, you need to see this now."

Chapter Twenty-Two

HANSEN SWUNG THE DOOR wide and stepped into the small storeroom. Ella was quick to follow. The light from the stable windows allowed her to watch him remove an old crate of some kind to reveal a very pretty gold-and-mahogany box about the size of a loaf of bread, with scrolls and etchings all over it. Her father's box! She had forgotten it existed until that moment.

"This is for you, Miss," Hansen said as he pulled it out. "I would wait until all is clear before you take it up to the house—unless you would prefer to open it out here. Then I would be happy to remain until you bring down the key."

She gasped. "The key! Yes, it belongs to my father's box."

"Aye. I had one of the footmen hide it in your closet years ago to keep it safe."

"How did you come by this?"

"As I said, your father gave the box to me shortly before his death and said it was for you and no one else. He was very adamant that no one know about it. He asked me to hide it up tight in a place her ladyship would never think to look. And so I did, out here in the back of the stables. It has remained here waiting for you ever since."

"Oh, Hansen, thank you!" Ella rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him. "I shall bring the key here. Wait for me."

It only took a few minutes to make it back to the stables. By the time she returned, Hansen had cleared out a good section of the ground near the haystacks and was waiting for her there. It was quiet, with only one or two of the stable boys doing their chores, but they did not pay any attention to her.

She sat upon the ground near a large bundle of hay and pulled out the key from within her apron pocket.

Hansen set the box down gently for her and then tipped his hat. "I will be waiting over by the door to see that no one disturbs you."

She smiled. "Thank you." It took no time at all to place the intricate key into the lock and turn it. The pretty box swung open easily and inside there were several folded pieces of paper. She pulled out each one individually and examined them.

Most of them were the deeds to the house, the land, the cattle—all of those important documents that one would need to show proof. On each and every paper was her name—Eleanoria Rose Woodston.

She really did own the whole manor. There were also estimated values of each property, and the sums reached more than Ella ever would have imagined. She shook her head slightly and wiped away a few tears. He had remembered her.

He loved her—until the very end. Despite what she had been told, he loved her.

She found a note from him, explaining all.

Ella,

I love you, my daughter. I worry how you will be treated if I

am to leave this earth before you have grown. Your stepmother means well, but she is vain and selfish at times. I am afraid for you, and so I have done the only thing I could think of to ensure that she treats you well. I have left it all for you so you may share and give out, as is your nature, to those I have left in your charge. Do take care of your stepmother and stepsisters. They will need much looking after once I am gone. I love you, my little Ella. I love you. Never stop riding—for it is an exceptional gift from above.

Now, my dear, within this box you shall find the deeds and property assessments of all the land and buildings, etcetera, that you now own. There is also another letter here explaining your mother's stipend that was inherited from your grandmother and to be given to you on your wedding day. The accounting and all the necessary

paperwork will be included in this box as well. You do own a large inheritance from both of your parents, but your mother's most definitely far exceeds mine. Your stepmother has no idea of its existence; I never mentioned you were wealthy in your own right. You do not need to share that fact with anyone if you do not wish it.

Also, my dear, there will be tucked inside some love letters between your mother and me from back in our courting days. You may enjoy browsing through those as well. I have included your mother's ring in addition to some other costly jewelry. You are welcome to do with it as you see fit.

I love you, my daughter. I love you. Never doubt this, for it is true.

Take care. Be kind. Be good. Be strong.

Until we meet again—

Love,

Papa

Ella slowly set down the letter and pushed the box away for a moment, her grief sharp all over again. Wiping at her tears, she pressed her lips together. What was she to do with such information? What did it really change within her? It did not bring her father or mother back—it just confirmed her father's suspicions that his new wife would treat her cruelly. It was a gift given by a loving, caring father, but what did it matter if she had all the gold in the land? She would never be loved by those to whom she had tried so very hard to prove her worth. If she came out with this box and letters and waved them about, it would change nothing—they would only hate her more.

She brought her knees up to her chin and stared at the stark walls of the stable. The gentle neighs and snorts from the horses brought her back to her current world. It would seem everything was hers now. Anything she could grasp and clutch and draw toward her was now at her fingertips. The love of a king, her father's wealth, her mother's wealth, her home, her lands—it was all there,

waiting for her to decide to take it up.

But could she?

She wrapped her arms around her legs and pulled them tighter toward her.

Could she handle the pressure of becoming a queen? Could she bear the load of being a wealthy landowner and having so many people under her charge? She had lived on so very little for so long, the thought of unimagined wealth startled her. In many ways she wished she could go back to being the little girl she once was and hide away, riding Sunshine for hours instead of facing reality.

What was she to do with her stepmother and stepsisters now? She needed to make several decisions, but did not feel up to the challenge of tackling even one of them. If she threw her family out of the home, then what? She would be no less cruel than they were—actually, she would be worse. But how long could she serve those who mocked her and treated her with such callousness now that she knew the truth?

She would shatter.

Her sharp tongue was too quick at times, and there would be no turning back. She

would most likely say things she would regret for the rest of her life. Her nature was not to be cold and selfish; however, she knew she would need to come to grips with her own self-worth before she could dare to become an example for anyone else.

Ella Woodston would have to fight. She would have to stand up and take back what was rightfully hers and claim her lands and title once more. But she could not think of such things at the moment. She simply could not.

Too much, too soon, too fast.

She needed counsel; she needed advice.

She needed John—er, Anthony.

Yes.

Sitting up more fully, she called out to Hansen. When he came, she asked, "Could you send something for me?"

"Anything, Miss."

"I would like to write a missive to the prince, something short—but I would like to do so secretly. Can you see that he receives it?"

"Yes. I will have one of the older stable boys run it up to the castle at once. Let me

fetch you ink and the rest."

"Thank you." As he left, she placed her father's papers neatly within the box, shut the lid, and locked it up tight. Dusting herself off, she made her way to the old storeroom and tucked it back underneath the crate. There it would stay until she was ready for it.

With a deep breath, she closed the storeroom door and began to sort her thoughts for the note she would write Anthony. By the time Hansen had rushed back with the writing tools, she was ready. Deciding simplest would be best, she merely wrote—

A—

I need you. Please come as soon as possible.

I will be waiting.

E

Chapter Twenty-Three

BY THE TIME ANTHONY received the missive, it was clearly too late to leave the castle—or his mother. He had been holed up in meetings all day with the other advisers of the kingdom, playing a constant battle of cat and mouse where he learned the rules and regulations and consequences of running it all. He was weary, exhausted, and felt as though his brain might have completely dissolved sometime over the last few days.

He needed his Ella as much as she needed him.

Smiling, he walked into the library to his father's desk and quickly penned a reply,

sending it off with a nearby footman. "See that one of the servants of the Dashlund home receives this and knows that it is meant for E. Woodston."

"Yes, Your Highness."

As he watched the servant go, he collapsed onto the settee—the smile still lingering as he thought of her. It was good she turned to him. He would take it as a sign that she was truly beginning to see how much she loved him.

His smile slipped. What if something had happened?

What if Ella's stepmother had done something? What if she were in danger?

Oh, great heavens.

He stood up and paced the library for several moments. This would not do. He must settle his mind and think rationally. Ella was fine. She was fine. She must be fine.

Clearly sleep was out of the question when such a note had been sent.

Groaning, he looked out into the night sky. It was far too late for a visit.

"What are you moaning about?" his mother asked as she entered the room.

"Nothing."

"Ella Woodston?" She grinned.

"Yes." He sighed. "She sent a note earlier, but I did not receive it until now."

"And?"

"That is all."

"And what did it say, dear?"

He collapsed back onto the sofa. "That she needed me and would be waiting for me."

"So she knows who you are now? The letter clearly made it into your hands."

"Yes, I told her the day Father died."

"The day you mentioned she did not know if she loved you?"

"The very same."

"Ahh." She sat down on the high-backed chair next to him. "So, this is in essence the first you have heard from her? And she needs you?"

"Yes."

"And what will you do?"

"Sit here and mope and moan and pray she is well—and probably not sleep until I hold her in my arms again and—" He suddenly stood up. "You know, frankly, I am not sure what it is I am still doing here. The moon can be hanged! She needs me. I must go now."

His mother smiled. "I was wondering

myself why you were still here."

He placed a quick kiss upon her cheek. "Thank you. I will be home later this evening."

"If you know what is good for you, you most definitely will," she answered, chuckling.

"I love you."

"I love you too, son. Now, hurry and go win *her* heart as well!"

"Yes, ma'am." He bowed and then called out the door to a footman as he left, "Get a stable boy to saddle my horse at once."

"I want to know every detail!" Her echo reached him as he started to head down the grand staircase. Shaking his head, Anthony grinned and chuckled. What would he ever do without his mother?

E—

Forgive this late reply. I have only now just received your note.

I hope to meet with you tomorrow or the following day at the latest.

I miss you.

A

Ella had just allowed the eagerness and anticipation to flow through her at the prince's reply when there was a knock at her bedroom door a second time that evening. She quickly folded the missive and tucked it under her pillow.

"Miss," one of the kitchen maids whispered as Ella answered the door, "sorry to bother you again, but there is someone awaiting you outside in the orchards."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He says he knows it is late, but wishes to speak with you nonetheless. Should I send someone to shoo him away?"

"Is he tall?"

"Yes, Miss. And very handsome, too."

Ella grinned. "No, I will go down myself shortly," she whispered. "Thank you."

By the time Ella had changed from her nightgown into a dress and made her way to the orchard, it had already

been a few minutes. She was not wholly foolish and did think to bring a large meat cleaver from the kitchen, just in case it was not Anthony waiting for her as she assumed.

Her faint worries were for naught.

"Ella!" he exclaimed as he rushed up to her, spinning her around in a big hug. "Are you well? Tell me that you are well. I have been frantic these past forty minutes or so, thinking the worst."

"Good grief, Anthony! You must put me down at once or I may chop off your head—clearly by accident, of course."

"What?" He laughed and set her down, his eyes taking in the large knife. "My word! You were not jesting."

"It took every bit of control I had not to cut you with it as you were flinging me about." She chuckled as she tossed in on the ground several feet away.

"Well, that will teach me not to come meet with you late at night."

"I had to be certain it was you, did I not?"

"Most definitely." He grinned, his

eyes roaming over every feature of hers in the moonlight. "I have missed you terribly."

"How are you?"

"I am well, now that I am here." He folded her back into his arms, much more gently this time, and kissed her. "It has been too long."

"Yes, it has," she murmured as she laid her head against his chest.

"Let us not wait this long before meeting again."

"No."

He trailed his hands up and down her spine, sending warmth dancing and pinging about all over her. "Now, tell me. All is well here, yes? You are not in danger?"

How could a man be so perfect? Grinning, she answered, "I am fine. I only contacted you because I needed some advice."

Releasing a sigh, his whole body relaxed. "What can I do for you? What do you need?"

She wrapped her arms tighter

around him. "It certainly is nothing that warranted you racing all the way out here. I only needed to speak about how I would like to handle my family."

"Tell me what has happened. Have you reached a conclusion?"

"No. But I did come across my father's documents, the proof that he had indeed put his deeds in my name. I own it all, everything—the lands, house, cattle, inheritance—it is all mine. He had also written a letter begging me to take care of my stepmother and stepsisters, but explaining his reasoning for giving it to me. He was afraid they would do exactly as they did and leave me with nothing."

"What would you like to do?" he asked quietly.

"Honestly, not anything. I want to go back to the way things were before. Nothing has changed in my eyes. They will still treat me the same way, if not worse, if they knew. However, I am afraid that if I do not put some plan into motion, I may begin to resent them and

react badly."

"You know I will support you in whatever you choose."

"Yes, I know."

"But, Ella, dear, you cannot wish to be their servant forever."

"Why not?" She closed her eyes. "I cannot see how I am worth anything more than that. I tell myself I am, but I cannot imagine trying to rise above this. It is all I have known for so long—what if I fail at the rest? What if I cannot do all that will be expected of me? Then what?"

"Then you fail."

"But …"

"So you fail. It is all right. We all fail. Every single one of us."

"Everyone?"

"It is part of life, my dear. You just pick yourself back up and move forward again. You certainly do not have to be perfect the very first time you attempt something new. What would be the point of living if you did not learn, if you did not grow and seek and challenge

yourself?" He pulled back to look at her. "We need to live life, all of it—the ups and downs, failures and successes—for us to truly know our worth." His hand came up to cradle the side of her head. "Ella, what I believe you need to sort out first is the value you place upon yourself."

What value? Glancing down, she grimaced.

"Ella, do not look away, my dear. Once you see your true worth, once you know exactly who you were meant to be—not what you *believe* you are—no, think past that to your destiny. Until you embrace all the world has to offer, you will never be free within your own heart. You will always be trapped within yourself, reminding your soul that you are not worth what others have. Whether you fail or not is not the question here; you will most certainly fail many times. What you need to ask yourself is whether you are ready to become all you were destined to be."

Her eyes flew to his dark, steady

gaze, the moonlight shining a bluish glow upon him. "Thank you." Stepping up on tiptoe, she pulled his mouth down to hers and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. This was her destiny. Here was her future.

If only she could allow herself to believe in its possibilities.

Chapter Twenty-Four

ELLA HAD HEARD WHAT Anthony said—she thought about it many times over the next three weeks or so. He had been faithful in his declaration to visit her more often. It was not every day, but he did come three or four times a week to talk and laugh—and teach her to dance, of course.

Each time he came, her heart grew larger and she learned more about herself than she ever thought possible. She truly began to trust that he loved her, that he saw her, and she also began to see how much good she did for him as well. There were days when they would hold each other and share memories of their

loved ones, and then there were days when he would spin her about and tease her and make her laugh for hours.

The blossoms eventually fell to the orchard floor and made way for the little buds that would sooner or later become apples. There was change happening all around them. When Anthony was crowned king, the village celebrated for three days. It became more impossible for him to sneak away, but he did so. Even if he could not stay long, he made a point to come as much as possible.

He was so very patient with her, so very wise as he spoke and brought out her fears and then laid them to rest. She was healing; they both were. But it was not until she was speaking with Lacey as she finished up the last fitting for the ball gown she was sewing that she truly understood what the prince had meant.

"Do you really believe Lord Gavenston will love me in this gown?" Lacey asked for the third time as she twirled before the looking glass, her pink dress spinning elegantly with her.

"Yes," Ella answered again. "Any man

who sees you in that gown will fall right at your feet."

Lacey groaned and plopped down on a chair near the window. "More likely I will fall at *his* feet and cause everyone else in the room to fall with me." She placed her elbow on the arm of the chair and held her head in her hand. "Everyone will run from me, and you know it is true."

Ella needed to be sure that Jillian did not wreak any more havoc at the ball. "I have a good feeling about this event. I would not be too down on yourself."

"Really?"

"Yes. I feel this ball will truly turn everything around for you."

Lacey sat up. "Well, thank you, though I do not know what I will do if it goes wrong."

"It will not."

"Yes, but how can you guarantee that?"

"Because something tells me that it is not entirely your fault."

"What do you mean?"

Ella grinned. "Just wait and see. Your assignment is to show up and be as beautiful and gracious as possible."

"Are you still coming?"

"Yes, I was planning to. Though, I have spoken with your mother and asked that I arrive by myself."

Lacey's eyes went wide. "How did she receive that?"

Ella shrugged. "I did not wait around to find out. I merely stated that I would be attending the ball through my own means and that I would not need the use of her carriage."

Lacey's jaw dropped. "Do you have any idea what my mother would do to me if I said such things to her?"

"Was it wrong of me?"

"No, not at all. But it shows a certain independence she would not appreciate. My mother loves to run things—and the fact she is allowing you to attend the ball on your own without pestering you about how you are to get there shows that she is much more terrified of you and the outcome of this ball than she lets on."

"Good." Ella smiled. "She should be. I have a kind heart, but even I can only take so much."

"Ella? What do you mean?"

What *did* she mean? She collected the sewing basket from off the floor and slowly began to place the items she needed inside. Was she truly willing to stand up and face her stepmother? Was she willing to become who she was meant to be? Could it actually be that simple, to just decide one day not to take it? "I do not know what has come over me. But I do know I am willing to begin thinking for myself, for the first time in a long time," she answered.

The point had come for someone to put Jillian in her place as well or she would only continue to grow and fester and become even worse than her mother.

That was the awareness that sank in the most. They were in the wrong.

It was not Ella, nor even Lacey. Jillian and Lady Dashlund had done wrong. They had harmed more than just Ella for the sake of their own greed and pride, and it must stop. Without saying goodbye, Ella walked out of Lacey's room and slipped into her old blue bedroom next door. She stood there for several moments, taking in the glorious furnishings and beloved ornaments. It took

a while before she truly began to see all that Anthony had been saying to her.

She deserved this room just as much as they deserved theirs. No, more so, for this room was rightfully hers. Eleanoria Rose Woodston was allowed happiness. She was allowed freedom and joy and she was allowed to believe in a future. They could not take that from her—they would not take it from her ever again.

It was most definitely time for the madness to stop.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE MORNING OF THE ball came bright and full of promise--the perfect, glorious day. Birds chirped merrily in their nests and a warm breeze kissed and danced its way upon the whole valley. There was an exceptional commotion in the Dashlund house when a large package arrived for Eleanoria Woodston from the palace. It was beautifully decorated with lavish gold ribbon.

Lady Dashlund requested that Ella open the box in front of them all in the sitting room facing the window showing the beautiful day outside. Once the box was opened, Ella pulled out one of the most stunning ball gowns she'd

ever seen. It was layers upon layers of the frothiest and lightest-weight blue gauze which floated and puffed and dipped and swayed as the dress was moved about.

Every one of the ladies gasped at the detailing of embroidered flowers and jewels nestled within the bodice. It was a gown meant for royalty, a gown that had surely cost a small fortune. Tucked within the folds of the tissue was also an elegant petticoat and blue feathered headdress, with matching full-length gloves and fan. The gift was so striking, so surprising, that it was several minutes before anyone could say a full sentence other than their exclamations over the gesture.

But once Lady Dashlund could speak, it was clear she was much more worried than before. "Well, Eleanoria, this is a nice gift. What a wonderful thing for the queen to decide to surprise you with such a gown on the day of her ball. I wonder what in the world she could mean by singling you out in such a way. It must be so very nice to be noticed by her, is it not?"

"Yes, it most certainly is." Ella grinned as she collected the mass of blue fabric and beads

and feathers and set it all back in the box. She would have to give Anthony quite the tongue-lashing for this one. Honestly, she had told him a thousand times that she had a gown to wear. He must have not believed her.

He was so good to her.

"Ella, would you like one of the footmen to bring the box upstairs for you?" asked her stepmother in a display of extreme politeness. "Actually, my dear, I am not sure that gown will fit in your attic room. Perhaps we should have him place it in your old room for the time being. I see no reason why you should not get dressed in there. It is quite the largest room in the house."

"Mother!" Jillian screeched as she moved around to the other side of Ella. "You know that room is especially for guests. Why should Ella use it to get dressed when she has a perfectly fine room up in the attics?"

"Because, my *dear*," Lady Dashlund's voice was terse, "your stepsister has been invited particularly by the queen to attend this ball. It is, of course, our duty to see that she dresses comfortably and arrives there in the greatest of ease." She turned toward Ella.

"Are you sure you do not need the carriage?"

"Yes. I am quite positive." Ella scooped up the box and began to walk out of the sitting room. "Oh, and Jillian is perfectly right. I do not mind dressing in the room you have given me all these years, though I thank you for the offer."

Lady Dashlund's jaw dropped and Ella caught the faintest of smiles upon Lacey's lips as she headed down the corridor. Jillian had been jeering at Lacey all morning with her snide comments about her clumsiness. It would be a nice day indeed to put Jillian in her place.

Ella smiled—it would be the most perfect day.

ANTHONY WISHED THE CARRIAGE would go faster. The beginnings of the ball were torturous enough, but to have to wait ages before he could see his Ella again was going to destroy him. He had left specific instructions with Zedekiah to look after Miss Dashlund and see that her sister Jillian was not anywhere around her. It had taken several

bribes and his favorite sword to convince the duke to attach himself to Lacey, but in the end he did.

So far everything had gone smoothly, as Ella had said it would. She was positive it was Jillian who was the culprit for Lacey's mishaps, and by the sullen look upon the younger Miss Dashlund's face when he left, it would seem Ella was right.

He asked the footman to wait by the carriage when they arrived, wanting to go to the door himself. As he rang, his hands shook and he quickly placed them behind his back so she would not notice. Tonight had to go smoothly. He had orchestrated it so the whole day would be a series of surprises for her, beginning with the gown and ending with—

"Well, hello!" she said as she opened the door.

His heart rate began to triple. He had never seen her look so exquisite before, from her adorned head to her pretty fan and gloves all the way to the bottom of the gown. "You are very lovely. You are quite possibly the most beautiful girl in the world," he said as he bowed over her hand as a gentleman.

She bit her lip, her eyes sparkling at him. "You look fine as well."

"So you did not wait for a servant to answer the door?"

"And miss seeing you the first moment I could? Of course not!"

He laughed and held out his arm. "Would you like to come, milady? Your carriage awaits."

"I would love to." She grinned and stepped out of the house, clutching his arm.

"I am happy to see the gown fit you so well. It is remarkable."

She chuckled. "Yes, it is. And it is a good thing I am somewhat skilled with the needle."

"Oh, dear. Did you have to take it in?"

"Just a bit here or there. But really, Anthony, it is so stunning, so absolutely the most glorious thing I have ever owned. You did not need to do it."

"Yes, I did."

"No."

"Ella, my dear, there is one thing you shall get used to, and that is this—if you are going to be on my arm, you will not wear someone's castaways. You will have your own new

finery to prance about in."

"Prance! As if I prance." She giggled.

"Well, you may not prance at the moment, but…" He opened the carriage door. "I have a few slippers for you to try on, which may make you change your mind."

"Anthony! You did not."

"I did." He smiled at her look of astonishment. "The dress size I could estimate. The shoes, no. It was much harder to know what size your feet were, so I had several made and you can choose the pair that fit you the best."

"They are all so perfect!" she exclaimed as he helped her inside and then thumped the top of the coach to signal the driver to go. They sat side by side. There were rows of slippers sitting on the other bench. "I have never seen so many shoes outside of a shop."

"Come, you, let us try them on and see which will work the best."

"Is there anything you do not think of? Here I was, secretly worried my boots would be seen, and you save the day by bringing the prettiest slippers a girl has ever worn."

He slipped her boots off, her toes wiggling

in the new stockings her stepmother had gotten her, as he tried first one shoe on and then another until he found a pair to fit. "Your feet are so small."

"Oh, I am glad these are the ones that worked. I think they are by far my favorite of the lot." She brought the shoe forward, examining the beads and lace clustered around the outside. "Is the heel made of glass?"

"Crystal, actually. It is much stronger than glass."

"Oh, Anthony! Thank you. Thank you so very much."

He leaned over and kissed that happy mouth. "You are very welcome."

"You have made me look like a princess."

"'Tis funny." He tilted his head and kissed her sweet mouth again. "I would have been certain you looked like a queen."

Chapter Twenty-Six

ELLA CLUTCHED HIS ARM as they made their way up the grand staircase leading to the ballroom, her crystal shoes delicately tap-tapping on the ground as she walked. She halted just before they went in, and he paused with her.

"Are you well?" he asked, his hazel gaze searching her features.

Taking a deep breath, she answered, "Just—just a little scared."

"*My* Ella?" He grinned. "*My* Ella scared? The girl who came at me in the dead of the night with a meat cleaver?"

Blushing, she looked away.

"Ella, you look beautiful. You will do fine."

She met his stare. "If I walk in there with you—on your arm, as I am—"

"People will know I am in love," he finished for her.

"Are you certain that is well with you?"

"What? That my guests know I am in love?" Chuckling, he shook his head. "When will you learn there is nothing about you that shames me? It is you I worry for now. If you prefer, I will walk away and allow you to enter all on your own, for then you will not have to face the gossip and stares."

She took another deep breath to steady her nerves. There was nothing he did not think of. How she loved him. She had always loved him—she just did not realize it. "I will enter with you."

He let out a gasp of air. "Thank you, my dear. You do not know what this means to me."

"I will most likely make a fool of myself the moment I step in the room, but as long as you are aware of that, then let us do so."

As they walked through the doors, the

herald announced loudly:

"His Royal Majesty Anthony Jonathon Algernon the third."

She clung to his arm, her heart failing her for a moment when she realized she was entering with the king. All eyes flew their way.

The herald continued, "And Miss Eleanoria Woodston, daughter of the late Lord Dashlund."

Gasps could be heard amidst the whole glittering party as Ella and Anthony made their way into the large, lavishly decorated ballroom. At least twenty shimmering chandeliers hung about them, lighting the beautifully gleaming wooden floor, and three times as many wall sconces held hundreds of candles, bathing the entire room in a warm glow. To the left upon a raised platform, a rather large orchestra sat waiting for their cue. There were multiple refreshment tables set up, as well as benches and chairs lining the circumference of the area. Hundreds of people were dressed to the hilt in colorful gowns and fancy evening wear. Their perfumes and the castle floral arrangements

faintly complemented the air, completing the ambiance of elegance as he walked her to the center of the room. All eyes were upon them.

Ella clutched his arm tighter as he pulled her around to face him. "Now? We must dance *now*?"

"I am the king," he whispered in her ear. "The ball could not begin without me."

"Then what have they been doing this whole time?"

"Boring introductions and musical recitals. Trust me, I saved you from the worst." He clutched her waist with his hand and slipped her fan over her wrist with his other so he could hold her gloved hand. "Are we ready to begin?"

"No. Anthony, I cannot." Her knees began to shake. "Everyone is watching us." She had no idea where her stepmother was—she could not make out anyone in this sea of people. It was all so terrifying.

"I would love to kiss you in front of them all right now."

He would not dare. She raised a brow. "And I would thump you if you did."

"Which is, of course, why I am behaving

myself." He chuckled and nodded his head at the conductor to begin the song.

A slow, melodious rhythm began to play.

"Are you ready?"

"Please do not ask such a question again."

"I will take that as a yes."

She glanced up. His steady gaze sparkled in the candlelight and she smiled. He was so incredibly dear and wonderful and handsome. He was her Anthony. And truthfully, there was nowhere else she would rather be than on this dance floor, in his arms, with his eyes shining down upon her.

"Just look at me. Look right into my eyes, and I will do all the rest." He grinned and then nudged lightly against her waist as he took his first step forward.

She did not break eye contact—she could not break eye contact. He held her quite captivated as they began to dip and sway and spin and glide across the floor in the king's waltz. The waltz he had saved just for her.

It was the most perfect night that ever was.

Much later as they were wandering by the punch bowl to partake of some refreshments,

they came across Jillian. Her stare was so intent upon Lacey and the duke that she did not notice they were there. Ella tapped Anthony's arm to make him aware of the intensity coming off Jillian. She stepped back a few paces and whispered, "Do you see how she watches Lacey?"

"Yes," he whispered back, his gaze taking in the couple who was laughing and heading out upon the dance floor. He smiled. "I think he likes her! Look, do you see the way the duke cannot take his eyes off her?"

Ella grinned. "Oh, I do hope it works out for them. She will be so happy!"

Just then, Jillian groaned and set her cup of punch forcefully upon the table. She began to march to the dance floor.

"We must stop her!" Ella hissed. "She will do something terrible to Lacey—to the whole room—if we do not."

"Shh…" He held out a hand. "Just wait. I have informed Zedekiah to keep Lacey as far from her sister as possible."

"You did?"

"Yes. And from what I can tell, he has succeeded in doing just that the whole

evening."

"Have I told you yet how simply marvelous you are?"

"Marvelous? I do not think you have mentioned that one before, but I like it."

She giggled. "You would."

"Ah-ha!" He folded his arms as Lord Gavenston bowed his head to Jillian before swirling Lacey completely out of her way and into the center of the ballroom to be surrounded by many other couples. "Just as I said he would."

Jillian stomped her foot. It was done so slightly that had Ella not been watching her, she would have had no idea Jillian had done so. Then she turned on her heel and headed back toward the punch. Her face was a gloomy mask she did not try to hide. When her eyes met Ella's, she balked and glanced toward Anthony and then back at Ella before walking toward another part of the room altogether.

"I do not think your stepsister Jillian is enjoying herself overly much," he commented as he unfolded his arms and held his elbow out.

She easily slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. "You know, I do believe you are correct, my dear." Their eyes met and they exchanged a grin for all the onlookers to behold, and many onlookers were doing just that—watching them.

"Come, let us forget about your stepsister and leave this place." He pulled her out the garden doors that were situated nearby and down the outside steps.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Somewhere special."

"Anthony! What will your mother say?" Ella had met the queen in the course of the evening and loved her instantly. It was obvious where Anthony had gotten his happy, playful mannerisms.

"She will mostly like say it is about time."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ELLA LAUGHED AS HE tugged upon her hand. She followed him all the way around the main castle walls to a series of outbuildings. "Really, Anthony, we are very far from the ball. Should we not go back?"

"And miss your surprise? Never! Now stop worrying and allow me to surprise you."

"In your special spot?"

"Yes, it is very special to me," he said as he took her through the back entrance of a building. She could smell the strong odor of animals and hay. "Anthony, where in the world are we?"

"Hush. And look." They came around the

bend and he pointed to a stall right in front of them.

Sunshine! She gasped, and tears instantly sprang to her eyes. "You found her! You found my Sunshine!" The horse nudged against the stall and whickered her approval. Ella wanted to rush forward and hold her and love her, but her stubborn feet would not budge an inch. In fact, when she tried to step, her knees buckled as great sobs of surprise and gratitude overwhelmed her.

Anthony caught her just before her gown puddled onto the dirty floor.

Ella tossed her arms around him and cried into his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

"Shh…I know you do. I know you do, my dear. And I promise you will never be without your Sunshine again." He then turned and brought her up to the beautiful horse.

"Where did you find her?" she asked as she unlatched the stall and stepped inside.

"It took me several weeks, but my men were able to locate her a couple of kingdoms over. She has gone through two owners since you, but all reports have been that she was

treated fairly."

"I am so glad. I have been worried." Squeezing Sunshine's neck, she pressed her lips to her mane and whispered, "I have missed you. I have so missed you. We will go riding tomorrow, I promise. And then every single day afterward." The horse whinnied and snorted as Ella's tears rolled down her sweet friend's neck. How she wished she could jump on her horse that moment to ride away from the world, but then she remembered her crystal shoes and the ball gown and held her tight instead. "Please do not think I will ever leave you again. How frightened you must have been to assume I did not want you anymore. Oh, Sunshine, I have missed you so very much." She stood there for several minutes, holding and murmuring to the horse before she pulled back and looked at Anthony. "Thank you." Great tears continued to fall as she said, "Just, thank you."

He opened his arms wide. She stepped out of the stall and fell into them, snuggling into his broad chest.

"I do not know what price you paid to get my horse back, but I shall be in your debt

forevermore. I do not know what I would do without you."

"Then let us never part, my Ella," he whispered. "Let today be the beginning of thousands of tomorrows." He slowly detached himself from her and knelt down upon the dirty floor, in all his kingly finery, in the most special place in all the castle. Taking her hands in his, he said, "Eleanoria Rose Woodston, I know I am a meddling, nosy, prying mess of a king—but I need you, my dear. I need you to live, to breathe, to laugh again. I have brought you your Sunshine, but you have brought mine. You are my personal ray of sunshine, and I would be honored if you would look past all my faults and consider being my queen."

She burst into tears again and nodded. "Yes. As long as I am with you, then yes, I will be your queen."

He stood up then and kissed her quite thoroughly for several minutes, in the middle of the stables, next to their Sunshine.

IT WAS SOME TIME later when the king

brought his fiancée back into the ball, both of them a bit worse for wear with their kissing and her hugging of the horse in the barn. But the smiles upon their faces were worth all of the shocked looks that came their way. He walked up to the platform and announced rather grandly, "I am the happiest man alive as I proclaim quite excitedly that Eleanoria Woodston, daughter of the late Lord Dashlund, has agreed to be my bride."

A great screech could be heard throughout the whole ballroom. Everyone turned and gasped as Jillian made her way up to the platform, her eyes taking on a crazy, frantic sheen. The guards quickly intervened and took her from the room as the rest of the guests applauded.

"Well," said the queen after she made her way over to the happy couple and kissed them both upon their cheeks, "It would seem as though not all of your family wish you well." She stood between them, wrapping her arms around each of their waists. "I, however, am very happy for you. You two will do wonderfully together. I can tell you were simply meant for each other." She smiled as

the assembly clapped on. Then she turned and whispered, "For who else would come back into a ball smelling of horse?"

Ella gasped in horror, and Anthony threw his head back and laughed.

ANTHONY AND ELEANORIA WERE married in a grand service precisely four weeks later. The queen abdicated her crown to Ella within minutes of the wedding and the celebrations continued well into the next day.

The months that followed were not happy ones for Lady Dashlund and Jillian. It was decreed by the king and queen of the land that they were to live in their home, but not in their fine rooms—they were to live in the attics, as they had done with Ella.

She was more generous than they were, as she did not make them live as servants, and they had nicer furniture in their rooms. But, as housekeepers of the queen's country estate, they were to manage and oversee the whole, but never truly live as if they owned it again.

When Anthony's mother learned it was

Jillian behind the disasters Lacey had caused, she brought Jillian up to the castle once a week for a year to tend the garden and earn back the cost of all she had ruined. As was decreed, had it been an accident, it might have been overlooked, but because it was done in spite, punishment was given.

Jillian eventually married a farmer. She was pretty enough in her simple wedding gown, holding the hand of her new husband, though her beauty soon began to fade once the first of her children arrived.

Lacey and the duke finally married as well. After the ball, when he could see her away from the catastrophes caused by her jealous sister, he soon began to enjoy her very much. Once it was revealed they each loved chess as much as the other—and not just loved it, but were equally matched in the game—it was soon decided a wedding would be imminent. For who could resist being married to the perfect opponent for life?

Ella and Anthony had four sons, all just as tall and handsome as their father, and caring and loving as their mother, and as sharp-witted as their grandmother. And they had a beautiful

spitfire of a daughter who could outride all the boys on any horse she chose. The royal children were truly the joy of the kingdom.

Anthony never could outride Ella. Though he tried several times to best her, she was simply the superior horseman—or horsewoman.

The king soon stepped fully into the legacy his father had left him and eventually went on to be a greater ruler than his good father had—though Anthony would never have believed it if you had told him so. Ella eventually got used to the gowns and dancing and events and all that was expected of her. She found inner strength and became a remarkable queen.

Together they ruled the kingdom in happiness, with many failures and laughter along the way. For this is the tale of how a lost young prince and a neglected girl learned to overcome all their doubts and fears to become the greatest king and queen ever of their kingdom.

THE END

PREVIEW

Chapter One

THE CHILD'S CRIES WERE loud and strong—strong enough to be heard through the torrential rain and roaring wind. It had been one of the worst summer storms the region had seen in years—breathtakingly horrid. Adale Waithwrite, a simple farmer, hunched down within his thin, saturated coat and wrapped his useless scarf tighter around his head and mouth. Though it was rain and not snow, it was a fierce, biting rain. A rain that was not forgiving or kind.

It brutally pelted his face and hands, stinging them with every slash of the drops

as they flew through the air to cut into his covered flesh. The clouds had come so quickly and forcefully that though it was just past four, you would have believed it to be nigh on midnight, so dark and cold it was.

The farmer heard the shriek again and turned in that direction, skirting the old forest.

"Hello?" he shouted into the sleet and rain. "Hello?"

The answering cries were louder this time and the farmer knew he was very close to the child, who was most likely tucked within the rock crevice. Attempting to climb a large boulder, Adale slipped and banged his knee. No doubt there would be a large bruise in the morning. Mumbling a curse under his breath, the man attempted again to scale the sheer rock, and this time managed to grip well enough to haul his wet body up and onto the ledge. Peering over the other side, he flinched as a great strike of lightning lit up the sky, its jagged lines spearing every which way.

The loud crash of thunder that followed immediately after shook the slick rock wall. When another bolt of light enraged the sky, he looked down and saw the shuddering boy

about eight feet below him, right within the crevice as he had assumed.

The boy was drenched, his arms wrapped around himself.

"Come here!" he shouted to the child. "Come! And quickly, too! This lightning is getting dangerously close."

He held out his hand and the boy stood up just as another crash of thunder exploded all around them. "Hurry!" Adale shouted again. "Grab my hand!" Adale's fingers were slipping from bracing himself in such an awkward position upon the boulder. "Now, boy!"

The trembling child clutched his gloved fingers just as the farmer began to slide back down the sheer boulder between them. Another flash of lightning tore through the rain as it poured all around them, and then the bang of the thunder immediately descended. In a show of superhuman strength, he hauled the boy up and over the rock as he slid down.

He balanced the small child against the boulder and continued to slip to his feet. Once he regained his footing, he quickly glided the child the last yard or so into his arms.

The sky boomed and lit again as the

farmer ran as fast as he dared in such a downpour. He clutched the boy to his chest and thankfully made it the fifty yards or so into the waiting cottage without mishap. His son met him at the door and stared in great shock at the whimpering child in his arms.

"How did you hear him over this storm?" he asked.

"The Gods, son. They led me to him. They must have." Adale shook his head as he set the boy on the table. "Hansel, will you hang up my coat for me?" He removed his overcoat, handing it to his son. He slipped off his gloves and scarf and tossed them into a bucket near the door. They would need to be wrung out later—his clothes were soaked through. One look at the scared, sopping boy and he knew this would be a rough night.

The child was merely dressed in knee breeches and a simple shirt, with an old wool hat atop his head. His shivers alerted the farmer to the great urgency needed to help him. "Hansel, fetch me a blanket for the lad." His son was quick to place the coat on the peg by the door and run to the bedroom.

Adale pulled the dripping hat off the child

and gasped when a long golden braid plopped out, its end tied with a battered green velvet ribbon.

"You are no boy at all, child! You are a girl."

She nodded and looked away, her arms going tighter around her trembling legs.

"Where did you come from? How are you out in a storm like this?"

"I …" The little girl opened her mouth to speak and then her eyes darted to Hansel as he came back in the room, carrying a thick blanket.

"Yes?" asked the farmer as he took the blanket from his son and wrapped it tightly around her. "Who are you? How did you come here?"

Her voice stuttered through her shivers, but Adale finally made it out. "My home—it is gone. Th—they took it."

"Who took it? Who are you? Why was such a small girl left all alone in the woods?"

"Father, let her speak. You ask too many questions at once. Can you not see she is frightened?" Hansel smiled at the girl and asked simply, "Where do you live?"

She took a deep breath and tried again, this time not so unsteadily. "I do not know where it is from here, or I would point it out to you. I became lost." Her voice had a distinct accent.

The farmer hissed and stepped back. "You are from the Larkein kingdom?"

"Yes." She smiled, most likely not realizing what danger she put herself in by uttering such words in this house. "Yes. My father was the king."

"Your father was the—" Hansel gasped and looked at his father. "My word! What have we done?"

"If they knew we had the Larkein princess in this cottage, we would be hanged."

They both looked at the little girl, and her bright blue eyes blinked back at them. She was a very pretty child, and clearly frightened. Hansel asked, "How old are you?"

She put on a brave smile and sat up straighter. "I am six! How are old are you?"

"Ten." He turned toward Adale. "What should we do, Pa? We cannot toss her out, surely. She is too young."

His father stumbled back a few more steps

and then slammed his palm forcefully upon the rocking chair. "We cannot keep her here! We cannot! Not with the king's men invading her home this very day. If they knew … if they knew she was with us—"

"What if they never found out?"

His father nearly fell to the wooden floor. "What? Never found out? Are you mad? How can we keep a child—a female child—with a distinct Larkein voice in our home without anyone being the wiser? Hansel, no. I must take her back into the night and allow the Gods to decide what is best to do with her."

"Pa, please! I know they are a wicked kingdom, but please! That does not mean the girl will be too. We can hide her—we can. And she can learn how to speak properly. We will say that she is my cousin, an orphan from your sister Claudine. Everyone knows she has just passed on and left a score of children—they will not think anything of it. Please, Father. You cannot send her out there. She will die."

"It is better that she die than us!" Adale pointed at the girl and she began to cry. "Take her outside this instant."

"No, I will not, for it is not right. She is a

child, Father. She can be trained to be good. Let us keep her, please."

Adale walked around and collapsed upon the rocking chair. "My heart is too soft," he muttered into his hand. "It is too soft by far. Now what have we gotten ourselves into?"

"I promise I will take full responsibility for her. I will see that she is safe and teach her our ways. Just do not make her go back out to meet her fate. Perhaps she was meant to come to us. You yourself said it was the Gods who led you to her. It can only be good that she brings."

His father groaned and hunched over in his chair. "I hope you are right, my son. I hope you are right." He threw out his arms. "Fine. She may stay. Though it is with great trepidation I agree to this."

"Thank you, Father." Hansel walked up to the little girl. He peered into her bright eyes and asked, "What is your name? What do they call you in the castle?"

She smiled big then, showing a missing top tooth. "Gretel. My name is Gretel."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JENNI JAMES IS THE busy mom of seven rambunctious children ranging from the ages of 2 to 16. When she isn't chasing them around her house in sunny New Mexico, she is dreaming of new books to write. She loves to hear from her readers and can be contacted at jenni@authorjennijames.com or by writing to:

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A GIRL WITH A SECRET & A PRINCE ON A MISSION

When Prince Anthony spies Eleanoria Woodston outside her family home dressed as a servant, he knows something is amiss. Pretending to be John, his cousin's outrider, he decides to take matters into his own hands and figure out why Ella hasn't been seen at court. And more importantly why the daughter of one of the wealthiest families in the kingdom dresses like a pauper.

Ella has had her own bout of trials, including losing her beloved father and facing the wrath and jealousy of her stepmother and stepsisters. Becoming a servant doesn't seem all that bad until the handsome John comes into her life, now he appears to be upsetting everything. Never before has she been so unsettled. Just his presence is making her dream of a life beyond this one.

When John invites Ella to the ball and she grudgingly accepts, he wonders if he's truly losing his mind. How would he ever pull off pretending to be John while obviously hosting the ball as Anthony? Especially when the stubborn girl has made it quite obvious she would never attend a ball with a snobbish prince.

Jenni James is the happy mother of seven boisterous children and the author of several book babies that include: Pride & Popularity, Northanger Alibi and Persuaded from The Jane Austen Diaries for teens and Prince Tennyson an inspirational novel. She enjoys writing clean literature for children, teens and adults. Look out for more of her Faerie Tale Collection!

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